

RUSTLER BASIN

IRA CALDWELL, riding into Shocton to contact Steve Paulsen, owner of the Judy Cattle Company, is run out of town before having a chance to dismount. Wounded in the leg, he eludes his pursuers, and takes refuge at the small Lamson ranch in the Rayado basin. Ruth Lamson tends his wounds, and there he makes the acquaintance of three hardcases who are supposed to be assisting Ruth's father with his stock.

As the hardcases' help does not seem necessary on the Lamsons' ranch, Ira decides to stay on and find out what is afoot in the basin. He discovers that rustlers have been rebranding Judy stock and the tale that unfolds makes for a fast-moving and exciting story.



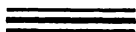
RUSTLER BASIN

by

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*All the characters and incidents in this story
are fictional and any resemblance to any person,
living or dead, is purely coincidental*

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1

IRA CALDWELL reached the rim rocks on the trail with the glow of setting sun. He quit the saddle, yanking the thirty-thirty Winchester from the scabbard, and plunged down behind the black stones while his horse went on over the plateau rim from sight.

He wiped blood from the left side of his face and, hat removed, reconnoitred the open part of the trail south towards Shoeton. No pursuing riders were close as he first feared. Yet he did not think he had much time to make a stand here. For there had been three other riders to the west running a dead heat for the trail. They had been far ahead of the half-dozen from town but he suspected they would join and come on for him. At best it could only be a brief stand here, but maybe long enough to hold them off until the sun settled behind the western horizon. He looked at it again, and uneasily back to the trail.

No sight or sound of those hard-riding gun packers who wounded him before he could get off his horse in Shoeton.

He took a little more stock of himself now, one wary eye on the distant bend of the trail where Ira expected to see them first. The shallow gash a little behind the left ear was a simple bullet scratch and it ceased to bleed. The hole drilled through the thick part of the upper left leg had never bled much. Mostly now it pained him and the leg was stiffening.

The way they jumped him in the cowtown came as a complete surprise. Sure, on the way east from Julesburg to Shoeton he had been warned the place was noted for toughness. But he accepted that with a grin. Hadn't he always got along in booming towns on the railroads by tending to his own business and keeping away from the hardcase joints? Looked like now his good intentions ran out.

He came off the dusty trail onto the main drag of false fronts,

eyeing the heavy traffic of riders and freight outfits with practised eye. He had seen a hundred such scenes. So he rode along before the imitation brick fronts, shipped in sections from the east, and now camouflaging unpainted boards behind them. Four foot letters on a high false front read TETON. On each side was 'eats' and 'whisky' in smaller letters.

Ira had considered the joint, suspected a greasy eating counter in back. Yet it would be a place to feed. He relaxed in the saddle, then swung weight onto his left leg intending to dismount and tie. It was at that moment a man let out a squall. Surprised, Ira twisted to glance down the street to the left.

Right out into it trotted a man holding a sixgun in his right hand. He slowed and yelled again. Traffic began to veer out of the block.

'There's another one of them!' the bit man shrilled over the spreading silence of the main thoroughfare.

Red locks hung below his battered black hat, and his run-over-at-the-heels boots stomped up the loose dirt in spurts before he halted. Once more he yelled and lifted his sixgun.

Ira couldn't believe he was that worthy's quarry. He had just ridden in, not even dismounted, and had never been there before. Not even in that part of Wyoming, in fact. Now he remembered that he had been tired enough to be dense also.

He knew the next moment they were after him though, when the big red head fired. The bullet whined by in the air, and Ira turned his dun horse from before the Teton. The red head's men were quick to pitch in to help him, or else already enjoyed favourable spots. Bullets came from several guns and then was when they got him, before he could vanish into a swirl of dust behind a suddenly running away empty freight outfit.

Everybody sought desperately to escape the scene where bullets flew in every direction. That helped Ira, and he darted around the corner of the block through an opening to the west. Behind the row of buildings facing the main street he paused for a breather.

He had been mistaken for someone else, Ira figured reasonably. But he needed time to explain. Riding north he came around into the upper end of the street there, halting to survey

it. There had not been much time to see any of the men shooting at him. Maybe one of them was an officer, even the red head. If not there should be one around. So Ira tried to figure out how he might ease in and contacting a badge packer identify himself.

He reasoned it would be simple, for in his pocket was a letter to one Steve Paulsen owner of the Judy Cattle Company. He acquired it in Julesburg from a friend who once ran Paulsen's wagon on the range. The friend who gave him the letter did so that he might get a job. It had been Ira's intention when he entered Shoeton to recoup himself and then ride south to the ranch.

There existed no reason why he could not yet do so. Ira believed as much until on the emptied street red head and several cowboys appeared mounted, coming up it. No law man's badge gleamed in the bright red sun on any of them, and before he started out of the open they spotted him. While they reached for weapons again the shout was raised and they came for him.

Trying to explain anything to angry hardcases was something Ira knew better than to try. He put the dun into a run and dug out of there on the north trail that flashed into being beyond the forks of the freight road.

The fast horse he forked carried him to immediate safety, and he got a chance to blow before pursuit raced into sight from town. Then he raced on again, unable to throw them off wholly. However, he did gain on them and Ira began to hope they would be discouraged to the extent of abandoning pursuit. Until he discovered the other three riders. They pointed for the trail about equal distance between him and pursuit from town. But they were also watching him as well as the larger bunch of riders. In this country where he knew nothing of people and factions it was stupid to assume unnecessary risks.

He pounded on, seeing the last of the three riders when they turned into the trail after him. That appeared to settle the matter of who's side they were on. Must be with the pursuit.

Now he considered the trail through the open stretch of the plateau. A stand of junipers covered one side of it about three quarters of a mile away. That would be time enough to prepare

for them. Once more he considered the sun anxiously. Half-way over the horizon and if they did not come upon him before it dropped, Ira could simply descend the rim, grab his horse and hide. That kind of luck he did not expect, and yet no thunder of approaching hooves dinned on the air.

Thinking he enjoyed a little time, Ira removed his thin cotton undershirt far enough to rip out the right sleeve. After reconnoitring again and listening intently, he unfastened the blue levi's. Tearing the sleeve into strips he wrapped the bullet holes of his left leg. That would protect the wound from further injury by chafing when forced to run on.

He was fully dressed when the sun dipped over the horizon, leaving an afterglow in the sky. No sound of riders at all. Yet they had come near. Two appeared this side of the junipers at a bare walk. That was why no echoes of them reached Ira on the air. He froze before moving the Winchester rifle into ready position. Almost at once they stepped out from the timber. The gathering night clothed them and he could not see enough of either for future recognition. That others were behind the timber was proven when one turned head to call something to the rear. Still no more advanced to where Ira could see them.

Slow hope raised in him. They could see the trail empty over the rim of the plateau into the great basin country beyond. Filled with creeks, timber and crags where a man could hide easily, they might consider it useless to go on after their quarry.

In about two minutes more that was what they did do. At least the advanced pair retreated behind the screening junipers. Ira listened with mouth partly open, trying to catch some sound of their withdrawal. No echo ever came.

He gave them another fifteen minutes, the dusk turning to new night. On leaving the cap rocks he did not expose himself. Hope surged high because he believed they were on the road back to town. Yet he took no chance of them being still close enough to spot him again.

Stealing over the sharp rim he found the trail, sticking weary booted feet into it. Down at the bottom where dark shadows gathered in a grassy plot stood his horse, grazing over bridle bits.

The basin was Rayado, famous cattle country in that part of

Wyoming. Flowing northward through it was a creek, the beginning fingers of which were east of the trail. In the saddle, Ira moved from the open grass onto one small branch of it, taking downstream through the timber while the starlight came on. Presently, too, he began to find scattered cattle, but unable to read the brands. Where the forks joined to enlarge the main stream Ira dismounted to water.

Tightening his belt against hunger, he rode on, encouraged by evidence of considerable cattle grazing on the region that he would soon come upon a ranch. In about an hour's travel he found a woods' road. It entered the timber away from the side of the creek where logs had been cut and hauled out.

There he paused to listen for sound in the night. No evidence of a habitation appeared. Yet he believed one must be close by, and kned the dun into the road. It meandered around, finally coming close to the bank of the creek.

A well-worn path crossed it, and on that trail stood a woman holding a filled wooden water bucket in each hand. Ira came upon her abruptly, not realising anyone stood in the small spit of starlight, white face turned on him. Indeed, since she was dressed in a pair of overalls too big for her and a man's patched shirt, it took him moments to realise that it was a girl facing him. Clammy with fever sweat, his head hurt as well as his leg. Which made him slow mentally. His first act then was to look around for a house, and not finding it he stepped to the ground from the saddle.

'Pardon me, ma'm,' he began, advancing towards the girl and leading his horse. 'I seem to be lost.'

'Most people are when they come to these parts,' she replied, a peculiar ring of resentment in her voice. 'However, you are close enough. Just go right up through there.'

She indicated an opening through the timber west and when he glanced in that direction Ira saw the dark outlines of three buildings and a corral in the starlight. The small ranch stood on level land where the timber was cut back. A log house of five rooms occupied a spot to the south. Beyond it, half-way to the barn and corral, stood a new one-room log cabin. No light showed in their direction yet there must be people up as the girl had come to the creek for water.

Despite his feeling of weakness, his feverish condition, Ira reached for the big wooden buckets the girl held.

'I'll tote them in for you, ma'm,' he said.

He held bridle reins wrapped around right wrist, and the girl was so startled by his politeness that she allowed the buckets to be taken from her without a word. Indeed, she remained startled until he walked away for the house.

She caught up to one side, and a dog without barking dashed off the house porch. The girl spoke a low word as it fell in at her side. The dun horse in raising head fast uncoiled the split reins from around Ira's wrist. He started to set the buckets down but the girl caught the horse quickly.

Ira went on, until she spoke short of the porch, where he now saw light from a small window shining out of the corner room south into near timber.

'Thank you,' she said quietly, taking the buckets from him. 'Put your horse away and come to eat. The men are in the kitchen.'

There was hardly any expression in her voice and he walked away wondering about it. In the shed side of the barn where he unsaddled the dun, were fastened several horses. In the shadows he could tell nothing about them, except that certainly several men stayed here. He emerged from the lot gate, fastened it and wiped sweat from a burning face.

The leg was so stiff now that he walked with a drag. It felt numb above the knee. Despite his condition he surveyed the premises on the slow movement for the log house. An isolated place. Probably a small cow outfit. In its hidden situation it appeared somewhat sinister. That was largely lost on him for he wanted most to get a bite to eat and a place to rest.

The brown dog raised onto feet on the porch at his approach. He took the one step onto whip-sawed lumber and lowered a hand to scratch between the dog's ears. The animal uttered a low whine, and next the door opened. In the narrow space appeared the girl against the lamp light. Through it echoed the rattle of tinware and the ponderous movements of men.

The girl said in a very low voice, 'Come in.' She retreated, leaving the door standing partly open.

Ira went on to it, crossing the threshold with hat in hand,

regarding the four men seated at one side and the lower end. Their whiskery, hardened countenances lifted on him in curious inspection. The three near ones said nothing at all, returning to finish their eating. The man at the end was old, probably sixty-five. His gray beard hung over on his chest and the front cord lacing of his red shirt. His eyes, embedded in wrinkles, gazed at Ira without much interest at all.

He said, 'Come on in and sit. Ruth told us you'd come.' Promptly he returned to his food.

Ira closed the door almost gently, hanging his hat on a peg in the log wall to the right. His attention centred on the girl, no other woman around. Her braided hair was coiled behind her head, and with a plate of grub she moved to the upper end of the oilcloth-covered table from the stove. Setting it there she lifted wide, clear gaze at him. Her face, a bit wan, did not reveal any expression whatever as she nodded that he should sit there.

As he moved forward in the light the girl spotted the bullet-torn holes in the black woollen trousers. There was a catch in her throat and her eyes lifted fast to him, questioningly so. Then he was over and sat down, the side of his head in the light. Blood had dried over the gash in the scalp, and it was on her side of the table. She knew then he was wounded, as suspected the moment before. The girl turned to the stove, busying herself in strained silence.

Drinking coffee first, Ira started in on the thick steak and the boiled potatoes on his plate. All the while he stole covert glances at the oddly assorted men at the table. The largest one sat on his right, slurping the final dregs from a coffee cup. He wore a tattered vest over a blue percale shirt through which his barrel, biceps and neck bulged.

The huge man said to the one next to him, 'Gimme your chawin' plug, Pete.' In forking it over Pete called him 'Tiny.' Probably a nickname because of his enormousness. Pete was medium sized, agate eyed and wore a continual scowl. The third man on the side ate quickly, quietly. Still as hairy faced as the others, and clothing as unkempt, this individual of two hundred pounds made some attempt to act civilised.

* Nothing from the girl until long after the men finished eating

at the table and sat wordless, chewing tobacco or smoking shuck-rolled cigarettes. Then she moved towards the old man.

'Dad, the newcomer is wounded,' she began in a level voice. 'You might doctor him if he needs it, when I clear the table.'

Not only the old man, but the others snapped eyes at Ira quickly. There was hardness in these men, nothing more. Their interest was curiosity and how it might affect them.

Ira sensed as much, that there was something else very wrong with the group here. If he ever saw hardcases, outlaws, this bunch of younger men were exactly that. Half animals, in some respects, theirs was the law of survival. The one jarring note that if this was an outlaw hangout, the girl, Ruth, did not fit into the supposition at all.

2

THE BURLY ONE said with eyes slitted, 'How'd you get shot, friend?'

Before Ira, replacing his cup on the saucer could reply, Tiny said quickly, 'Cheyenne, this feller looks familiar to me.' He shifted on the heavy chair towards the cowboy. 'I seen you before somers?'

Leaning back on his seat Ira got out his tobacco sack, turning from inspecting them to Ruth to ask, 'Ma'm, can I smoke?' The sudden red tinge in her cheeks told him something else. It was indeed a rough lot of men here, who ignored her or thrust their crass manners upon her unfeelingly.

'Please do,' she replied firmly, yet he caught the tenseness in her voice.

Murmuring a thanks, he faced the men again saying to Tiny, 'No, I doubt it. I'm a long riding man. Never been in this section of Wyoming before. Rode into Shoeton aiming to fodder and come out. Gun hawks jumped me in there. I'm shot up some, but not seriously. Plugged through the upper left leg. The gash on my head only hurts. Reckon I'll be all right soon enough.'

The face of Cheyenne settled into lines and his faintly suspicious eyes rested speculatively on him. Ira sensed that he was the leader here, from the deference the others accorded him.

'So Steve Paulsen started cleaning the town of long riders as he's claimed he would?'

Ira shook his head, hiding a start.

'I wouldn't know as to that. The way it happened was that some red-headed bucko started yelling at me. From there on it happened fast enough.' He stopped there, and since the men at the table remained silent, obviously waiting for him to go on, he did continue. He gave it briefly, how he rode in as a stranger

and was fired on. The rest he concluded with the simple statement that he outran pursuit.

The story appeared to settle some kind of doubt with Tiny, Pete and Cheyenne.

'The red-headed feller you mention,' came from Cheyenne, 'he was Steve Paulsen. Owns the Judy Cattle Company south of town. Claims everybody living in the country is rustling his cows.' His eyes flecked suddenly and he added with a sly grin, 'Especially anybody living in Rayado Basin!'

'So I rode into a clean-up,' Ira murmured wryly. Good thing he did not mention the letter in his pocket to these men.

Cheyenne's speech gave him definite knowledge of them. More came from the laughter of Tiny and Pete at the words. These men were hardcases, if not outlaws as he suspected.

Rising to his feet Cheyenne said to the old man, 'Lamson, when you get through with him, send the stranger on to the cabin.'

The old man merely inclined his head, Tiny and Pete rising from the table. Then Ira experienced an uneasy sensation. There existed a division here. The three hardcases making one, the girl and her father the other.

'We'll fix you a place to sleep,' Cheyenne offered Ira.

'I'll make him a shakedown here,' Ruth spoke out quickly. 'Being wounded maybe it would be better for him in the house.'

'Yeah?' Cheyenne turned towards her frowning. 'We could take over some more quilts to fix him up.'

'I said a shakedown here,' she insisted firmly. 'I don't want any more of my best comforters taken to the cabin.'

That appeared to settle some doubt of her reason for keeping Ira in the house in Cheyenne's mind. He only nodded his head and was first through the door onto the porch. Tiny and Pete followed, the latter closing the door.

Silence settled in the room as Ruth gathered up the dishes. Lamson did not move when Ira arose to get out of the way. He piled a few dishes himself, taking them over to the small wash table. Ruth passed him silently at work, a small amount of red still in her white cheeks. It seemed to increase when he got a towel to dry the dishes for her.

After the table was cleared and crumbed, Lamson arose to

enter the north room through an uncovered connecting doorway. There was a fireplace in it for winter heat. On the mantle were small cardboard boxes in which he fumbled for several minutes. Finally he produced a bottle containing a dark liquid and two cans of salve. These he brought forward to the table, leaving them there.

'Ruthie, you'll have to get him the rags,' the old man said in a heavy voice. He lifted his head at Ira, 'You able to doctor yourself, ain't you?'

Ira said that he was, whereupon Lamson returned to the north room and from there to bed in the back of the house. Several minutes elapsed before Ruth spoke.

'Was it really true about the fight you told them of?' she asked, her voice somehow hollow. 'I—I'd decided you *had* lost your way in here as you said earlier.'

'Yes, ma'm. I fled into here and naturally got lost because I don't know the basin.'

'You wasn't coming here from Shoeton anyway?'

'No.'

She studied him over the dish pan a moment and appeared to become hard again.

'I was hoping different,' she answered finally. 'That you are not like them. But if Mr. Paulsen jumped you, I reckon you are.'

'How different from them, ma'm?' he queried.

Her face turned on him quickly and for once she smiled, a bitter expression of irony.

'You know very well from their looks what they are!' she flashed.

'Yes, ma'm? Hardcases?'

'I have the worst suspicions about Cheyenne Roden. Though he's a mite more refined and smarter than Pete Tucker and Tiny Welks.'

'Hmm, them's their names,' he murmured, running them through his mind and not recognising a single one if they were supposed to be noted outlaws.

'My father is Dave Lamson,' she said next. 'He thinks they are helping him,' she went on with a note of defiance in her voice. 'But the four months they've been here I haven't seen much of it!'

So that was the division, an old man being taken in by three hardcases, sleeping and boarding at his expense. The girl resented their imposition, disliked them because they made life pretty tough for her here in the basin. He felt sorry for her, wondering just what was behind the situation.

He said, 'I'm Ira Caldwell.'

'Your true name too, I expect,' she replied. Again faint protest and irony rode her voice. Ruth was in a bad mood and felt badly dealt with.

'Yes, ma'm,' he assured her solemnly. 'That is the only name I've ever had.'

She glanced at him sharply once more. When the washing was through, the rest of the kitchen cleaned, she took off the apron and hung it on the wall.

'I'm sorry for being rude,' she spoke contritely. 'It's just that often lately I'd like to be a man. Saddle my horse and ride out of the basin!'

Hanging up the wet dish towel he drawled, 'Gets right lonesome in here so far from nowhere, I guess.'

To which he got no answer. Later Ruth walked close to inspect the gash in his head.

'Sit down,' she instructed. 'I can fix that wound.'

'Now, ma'm, I don't want to be such a bother to you folks.'

'Take the chair,' she ordered more commandingly. 'I take back my other words. Outlaw or whatever you are, you're at least a gentleman!'

Ira sank onto a chair, sitting quietly while she procured rags and a pan of warm water. Soaking loose the dried blood she cleaned the wound before applying the brownish astringent medicine from the bottle.

'I'll leave you now,' she said. 'Doctor your other wound. I'll make you a pallet in the corner by the fireplace. You can sleep there. I'm sure it will be better than in the cabin with those untidy men!'

She flashed away into the north room, thence into the back part of the house. Working unhurriedly Ira unfastened his gun belt and trousers, proceeding to doctor his angry red wounds, bandaging with the clean white cotton rags she left on the table.

Thereafter he sat smoking until after she made a shake-down pallet on the floor in the other room. After quitting that part of the house the second time she did not return. Nor had she glanced once into the kitchen. Patently she retired for the night, and blowing out the lamp he walked into the north room and to bed in the corner by the cold fireplace.

Sunlight through the window awakened him and he arose, dressing fully. In the kitchen he kindled a fire in the cook stove, and washed. No one was astir as yet. Out on the porch the friendly brown dog joined him with a few barks and some prancing around. Always liking dogs, Ira petted the animal on the way to the barn. There he started the feeding and had it almost done when the three hardcases showed up sleepy eyed and unwashed.

They perked up some on discovering they had no chores to do. When they came out before the small log barn Lamson appeared from the cow lot on the other side carrying a heavy metal pail towards the house.

'Grub pile purty soon,' Tiny offered.

They saw when Ira moved that his left leg was stiff and it gave him an odd motion. Cheyenne glanced at the rising sun and back to the cowboy.

'Looks for sure like you can't ride to-day,' he began in an amiable voice. Tiny and Pete listened intently.

'I reckon not.'

'If you was gonna ride, which way would you be going, now?' Cheyenne asked casually.

There might be danger behind the words and Ira thought briefly before answering.

'The way I feel I'd be likely to ride south,' he observed. 'I'd like to give that Paulsen some lead in return.' Not that he meant it at all but the statement appeared to please the hardcases.

'What did I tell you, Cheyenne?' came gloatingly from Tiny

'Shoot him plumb dead, I suppose?' Cheyenne drawled unconcernedly.

'What do you think?' Ira asked sarcastically for their benefit. 'By the way,' earnestly, 'what kinda law they got in this

Shoeton, would it be liable to arguy about a gunfight more or less?

'Where it concerns Paulsen, what little there is would,' Cheyenne assured him. 'Better lay off, unless you can get him from the road side. This Paulsen don't like long riders. It's like I told you last night. Anybody not judged by him, or working for the Judy outfit, in his opinion is a thief.'

'Taking in a lot of territory, ain't he?'

'Sometimes it may look so,' Cheyenne replied woodenly. 'If you don't get attached some place real sudden he'll be hunting you again.'

Lamson appeared on the porch to yell at them that breakfast was ready. Ira had to walk slow. Tiny and Pete hurried on while Cheyenne fell in with the cowboy, pacing himself to keep beside him.

Just before they reached the porch he said, 'Look around and figger things out for yourself. Come to mind what you wanta do, lemme know.'

Ira inclined his head that he heard, without commenting. Whatever the hardcase meant remained to be seen. This place could well be a rustler ranch. Tiny and Pete were already at the table with Lamson, scoffing noisily on ham and eggs with hot biscuits and honey. Cheyenne slumped into the far corner chair and pitched in with them. Ira moved more slowly to the upper end chair, where food had been placed for him by Ruth.

Ruth stood near the stove, waiting on the men and refusing to accord him a single glance. Ira did not hurry at all, taking his own good time. Lamson finished first, then Tiny and Pete. They stalked to their feet waiting for Cheyenne near the door. When that worthy finished he came away from the table saying to Ira, 'We'll do a smattering of work and see you some time later.' That and no more, and they were gone towards the barn. Lamson got the slop bucket and carried it out. Later Ira found it at the lot fence, the old man having saddled and ridden off with the hardcases.

When the others were gone Ruth quietly got her breakfast, sitting at the corner nearest Ira to eat.

'You folks raise cattle, I reckon?' he ventured.

'Yes, a couple of hundred head. Some chickens and a few hogs.' She kept her head over the plate.

That many cattle could be handled by one man except at branding time. Lamson had utterly no use for the three hard-cases this time of the year. Or any other for that matter.

'You could likely run more cattle, ma'm?' he asked thoughtfully.

'We could if the rustlers would leave the basin alone,' she replied in a voice that rang with the bitterness he discovered the previous night. 'And if rustlers weren't enough to keep a small cowman down, there's the 3 B outfit. In the other end of the valley. Claim it all.'

Thereafter he drew her out slowly by prompting an interested question at the right time. It was a story not unusual, and certainly no strange situation to him. The 3 B outfit were range grabbers, three vicious men bent solely on expanding into a great cattle domain. Paulsen to the south stopped them on that side, so they bossed and used Rayado Basin as a matter of course. The outfit's name came from the three brothers, Deke, Ewel and 'Simp' Buzzard who owned the 3 B.

He liked the pleasing sound of her voice despite the sadness, and sometimes the derisive bitterness in it. So he sat listening, dreaming a bit on his own account. And then she stopped talking abruptly. Nor would she return to the easy manner again, but proceeded with the kitchen work. Hoping he might get her out of the harsh spell into which her mood plunged, Ira helped around a while. The attempt failed and when she turned to the other housework he walked stiff legged to the barn.

There he combed his dun horse, wasting time in the barn until finding the slop bucket by the fence. He carried it to the house and in the kitchen was startled to discover Ruth wearing a checkered gingham house dress. The change in her was astonishing. His eyes filling with admiration at her slim loveliness brought a deep flush of pleasure to her cheeks. Yet hardly before he could engage Ruth in conversation she fled to the other room.

Disappointed, Ira got the water buckets, spending considerable time making his way hop-along to the creek and return.

She was in the kitchen again when he placed the buckets on the shelf.

'You should not be working with that leg,' she reprimanded him in an even voice. 'Too much exercise. It will bring on the fever, so you'd best lie down.'

'Why, ma'm, I feel like helping out around here.'

Her eyes opened wider and she said, 'Fiddlesticks! My guess is that you're no better, or no worse than the others!' That spoken in a measure of ire she departed.

Puzzled by her quick changes of mood Ira went outside towards the barn. He was there with the dog at eleven o'clock when Cheyenne dashed around the far west corner of the corral. His gaze searched about quickly, hit Ira and he came on. Such was his appearance of urgency the cowboy stepped clear of the barn front to meet him.

'Saddle your bronk and take to the brush,' Cheyenne began briskly on pulling rein.

'Something up?'

'Dang tooting! A bunch of nine riders come off the plateau rim. Looks like Paulsen leading them. Chances are he's trying to find you. Didn't happen to kill anybody yesterday, did you?' Cheyenne's eyes contained just that suspicion.

Ira shook his head.

'It happened like I said. So I've brung Paulsen in here? Hmm, I'll wait around.'

Anger suddenly shot out of Cheyenne. His voice did not raise high, yet it shook with some rage.

'You won't hide here and shoot him from ambush! That would ruin our set-up pronto. You'll do like I say, saddle and ride onto the creek until they leave. That's the best place for you!'

Ira appeared to give in from a stand he had no intention of making anyway.

'How'll you fellers make out?'

Cheyenne laughed, and a sly grin marked his mouth.

'Me and the boys are working for old man Lamson. So when them rannyhans show we'll be driving in fifteen-twenty cows to work on. He'll rant around and threaten as usual, and then ride off.'



'Yeah. Okay and thanks for warning me.'

'Maybe it ain't you he's after, but finding you here would be just as bad,' Cheyenne allowed next.

'How much time have I got?'

'Thirty minutes maybe. But get away as soon as you saddle.'

'Yeah.'

Ira turned for the barn shed. Before he made it Cheyenne galloped out of sight into the timber from where he appeared. The cowboy moved on inside, and did saddle the dun. Doing so he remembered two slips Cheyenne made. Both gave him more proof the hardcases were here for their own interests. Not likely did they coincide with anything good for the Lamsons.

Cheyenne warned him to hide because his presence might harm a deal of their own. Obviously they used Lamson as protection to remain in the country while pulling something crooked. Second, Cheyenne's description of what Paulsen might do meant they had had several previous experiences with him here at Lamson's place on the same order.

Leading the dun outside Ira clamped his teeth together against the pain to mount. Once in the saddle he did not head for the creek. Instead he rode to the front of the house, dismounting at the south end which was closest to the timber.

Surprised at his coming on a horse Ruth stood in the doorway of the kitchen when he reached the porch. She retreated before him and inside he asked if she had a pencil. As she turned to get it he caught the sudden question on her face. It was hidden when she returned with a lead pencil.

Leaning over the cleared kitchen table Ira took the letter from the envelope addressed to Steve Paulsen. Rapidly he wrote below his friend's scrawl, 'It was me you wounded and chased out of town yesterday. I reached here for help and have run into a strange situation. Intend to remain a few days longer to find out more. Will contact you later, provided you can explain how come you shoot strangers on sight.'

Replacing the sheet of paper in the envelope soiled from being handled in his pocket, he sealed the flap down. Now he walked over and handed it to the wide-eyed girl. Ruth's expression was one of incredulity and it climbed sky high when he spoke next.

· 'I'm taking it that you're honest folks. You're in trouble here, aren't you?'

To that she did not reply, her face whitening a little. But she nodded her head slowly. ·

He believed just what he told her, and best of all that for some reason he could trust her implicitly no matter what she imagined him to be.

'That envelope can get me killed,' he warned tersely. 'Hide it. Let no one see it at all. Paulsen is headed this way, so Cheyenne claims. If true, and you can possibly slip him that without *anybody* seeing you, tell him not to disclose that envelope or read the letter until safely away. Will you do that for me, please?'

When Ruth inclined her head he turned out of the kitchen, satisfied that she would be as discreet about the matter as possible. Ira stepped off the end of the porch, scratched behind the dog's ears, and lifted into his saddle.

He turned straight into the timber from the house, hearing somewhere the rustle of movement. Probably of stock, yet it could be riders coming in. The sound was faint and it vanished altogether as he circled around under cover for the creek.

3

IRA DID not go far, sliding into brush on the creek bank directly opposite the house. Now he identified the noise on the vagrant wind as cattle being held somewhere northwest of the premises. There were also riders on the move, and he could hear them to the south while making his way cautiously to a big tree closer in towards the barn. Here he obtained a narrow view on a slant through the timber.

Paulsen brought his crew in somewhat sooner than Cheyenne predicted. They came around from the west, appearing on the edge of the clearing between the new cabin and the barn. The same big man of the day before rode in the lead. His vest flopped in the breeze and now he wore a belly beaver hat casting shadow on his shoulders. Paulsen looked to be all the cowman it was claimed.

The band slowed to a trot working towards the barn. Since no one came out to meet them Paulsen pulled away from his men. Ira could see the light colour of Ruth's gingham dress on the porch, and he heard the cowman's voice raised at her.

'Ma'm, where's your men folks?'

Her answer came so low it did not echo far. So low indeed, that Paulsen repeated his question while riding all the way over to the house porch to face her. Ira could not see what transpired there, imagining that Ruth got the opportunity to carry out his request.

Over before the barn the mounted cowboys were attracted to the west timber and they spread out towards it before several cows came into view from the brush. More came through, then Lamson and Tiny before the other two riders. By then Paulsen rode back to his crew. They pulled to one side to let the small bunch of cattle into the corral. As that was concluded, Lamson, Tiny, Cheyenne and Pete confronted the cowboys without dismounting.

Paulsen did a lot of talking at them, occasionally interrupted or answered by Lamson or Cheyenne. Tiny and Pete merely kept their mouths shut, posing as wholly uninterested in what transpired.

Whatever the argument it lengthened. Finally a cow started out of the open corral gate. Pete shunted the animal back and dismounted to fasten the gate. He did not return to the saddle, leaning lazily against the pole fence.

Noon came and went before Paulsen quit whatever his tirade was, jerked a hand at his men and led them west on the wagon road cut through the timber and bramble. After they disappeared Lamson put his horse away, walking over to the house. The three hardcases opened the corral gate to let the cattle wander out on their own.

Nothing was going to happen and Ira slipped back to his horse. Mounting, he proceeded at a walk downstream, studying the vicinity until more than a mile north of the place. Circling, he wandered aimlessly through the timber and small grassy glades. West of the ranch he found the wagon road, showing little use. Over it were the tracks of many riders.

Ira took the road himself, discovering it circling around natural obstructions, such as ravines, and upright granite crags, to the southwest. After three miles he gained into fairly open range of the basin. The main road was a ribbon down which the Paulsen crew had gone, reaching for the rocky rim of the plateau.

The adjacent areas he surveyed, riding around to considerable extent. He returned to the Lamson place just before sundown. Ira helped do the chores with Lamson and Tiny. Cheyenne and Pete did not put in an appearance until lamp light glowed in the kitchen. They joined them on the walk over, neither the old man nor Tiny having referred to Paulsen's visit at all.

But Cheyenne did immediately, grinning good naturedly at the cowboy. Paulsen had given them quite a time, he averred. His argument this occasion was more than just that, that Lamson would be smart to dispense with so many riders.

'He said too, that he'd cleaned hardcases out of town,' Cheyenne remarked slyly again. 'Said they chased one this

way and he reckoned the critter had crossed the basin on north in a hurry. He likewise said it wouldn't do no good to ask us did we see any of them fellers fleeing across the basin he'd chased from town!

Surprisingly Lamson broke into the conversation.

'Paulsen ain't so bad,' he averred. 'But a little feller like me has got as much right to live as anybody else. Paulsen would like to run over me here. Them Buzzards is putting more cow critters this way and I reckon I'm going to have real trouble with them soon.'

Both quieted on reaching the kitchen, and conversation was wholly lacking during supper. The hardcases showed faint surprise to find Ruth in a house dress instead of the old overalls and shirt formerly worn.

As soon as they finished eating the hardcases stood up from the table. Short of the door Cheyenne paused long enough to say to Ira, 'Come over and visit a spell after while.' Then they all retreated from the house and Lamson went away to bed early.

Not until they washed the dishes did Ruth speak to the cowboy.

'I got the letter to Mr. Paulsen.'

'Thanks.'

'He stuck it in his pocket, and asked me how come the letter was addressed to him by an old friend. So you have known him a long time, well enough for him to recognise your handwriting? That doesn't tie in with your first story, Mr. Caldwell!'

'Ma'm, that letter was to Paulsen from his former wagon boss recommending me for a job.'

'Oh,' escaped her lips. 'Well,' after a few moments pondering, 'I told him yes, I reckoned. I also said that his friend was wounded yesterday in town and he exclaimed, that couldn't be. So I said it was and that while you was gone now I gathered you'd be around again in a few days.'

'I was stalling,' she explained. 'Not knowing what to tell him because he identified the handwriting on the envelope as that of a friend and wanted to ask a lot of questions.'

'He'll know now,' Ira assured her.

'When you're well you will go there, then?' she asked with a catch in her throat.

'Ma'm, I ain't made up my mind. Got some time on my hands and sort of killing it while deciding.'

'I—I hoped you'd stay around. Especially after to-day,' she said earnestly.

The wish in her voice caused his chest to tighten but before he could lead her into talking again the dishes were finished. He left the house, strolling with dragging leg over to the cabin. The door stood wide open for air, and a burning lantern hung from a bare rafter. At a greasy topped small table made from packing cases the three played desultory poker.

Cheyenne alone greeted him when he entered and the first question he asked was, 'You carrying a handle these days?'

'Ira Caldwell,' the cowboy replied.

When he threw the name through his mind and it awoke no memory Cheyenne smirked, guessing it was a phoney alias.

'I reckon that'll do,' he observed. 'You come to any decision with yourself?'

'None. Thought I'd start riding in a day or two. Kind of look the situation over. These Buzzards now, real mean folks?'

Immediately the hardcases went very quiet, watching him until Cheyenne broke the wooden stiffness.

'Don't worry about the Buzzard brothers. Thing is, while you're looking around stay clear of Indian Flats.'

'That place close to here?'

'Right on north and west of the creek. The reason is that fellers in there don't like strangers poking about. I'll tell you why when you make up your mind whether you're gonna stay or not. Reckon I don't need to tell you no more. You're a long rider. You been around.'

The hardcases returned to their game. In between hands Cheyenne talked on. Now he described parts of the Basin, giving Ira a fair picture of the recesses and wild country in it. Finally growing tired he left them. In the house the lamp had been left lighted. Ira blew it out and went to sleep on the pallet near the fireplace.

The next morning Lamson hitched a team to the wagon and drove off for Shoeton. Ruth did not go with him and her father would be absent at least three days. Ira wondering, was at the barn while the outlaws saddled for a ride somewhere. That

wasn't explained either, though abruptly Cheyenne turned to him to say they would likely be absent a couple of days or so.

'One thing I'd better tell you,' he continued while Tiny and Pete mounted away from them. 'Old Lamson now, don't make up to the gal. She says so to him and he'll get into a tear. Grab his shot gun and threaten to shoot you. Naturally he couldn't get away with it even if he figgers he can protect her. The point is that we want to keep peace with him a spell longer. Just you behave and we'll all get along first rate.'

'You won't have to worry about me, Cheyenne,' Ira answered solemnly.

The hardcase swinging up onto his horse, gave him closer inspection and looked annoyed.

'I mean it,' he warned brittlely. 'I seen you making up to her. Doing things for the gal. Stuff like that. Better knock it off for old Lamson is already giving you hard looks.'

After they rode off north Ira leaned against the front wall of the barn, making and smoking a cigarette. A strange situation indeed, and wondered why he didn't pick up and leave. While his leg was sore and stiff, he could travel after a fashion. He could make it easily to some other ranch. One less sinister and brooding. Recuperation could be done there just as well. Also, he wondered vaguely now why he bothered to get the letter into Paulsen's hands. It wasn't likely that the cowman would hire him, or that after being wounded by Judy men he would want to work for that outfit. An impulse caused him to do it, because Ruth plainly indicated that Paulsen was the only honest big man in the country.

Instead of going to the house at noon he walked down on the creek. Selecting a good spot he washed his clothes, including underwear and socks. While they dried hanging on bushes he lay in the grass naked, and slept some. Most of the afternoon was gone when he roused up and dressed.

Returning to the barn late in the afternoon he did the few necessary chores. When he went to the house for the slop bucket he found that Ruth had already milked the cow and gathered the eggs. After feeding the hogs he had nothing more to do, for even the water buckets had been filled. He sat on the porch, the dog on the ground at his feet until the dusk came on.

Lamp light grew into being in the kitchen before she summoned him to supper. Only two places set, and she ate with him. Once at his inquiring look she smiled.

'Whenever father has to go to town they always leave the ranch,' she said.

'Didn't know that. I could go, too. Imagine it's better for you with them away.'

She flushed slightly.

'I can take care of myself. But I am always glad they leave. Only, I sometimes wonder where they go to.'

That was a point, yet she did not continue and he could not lead her out. The dishes that night were few, and after she entered the other part of the house he blew out the light. Then he took the pallet-out on the porch, making his bed in the shadows against the wall.

The following day for him was one of doing the small amount of ranch work, and loafing. After each meal Ruth immediately vanished. During the short periods they were necessarily together she remained uncommunicative. The hardcases did not return that day either.

It was the next morning an hour after breakfast when four riders galloped in off the road. Ira had just brought in an arm load of stove-wood from the outside pile. He heard them clatter up, and next Ruth was through the north room door onto the porch. Voices raised at once in uncouth, harsh words.

When Ira got outside on the porch, taking his good time to hide his physical disability, two men had dismounted and stood at the north end. Ruth faced them under the roof. Farther out two cowboys remained in their saddles. The pair looked enough alike to be brothers, dark-skinned men of ample girth but under six feet in height. Both wore moustaches pointed below the corners of their mouths and were clean shaven otherwise. Almost instinctively Ira guessed them to be two of the Buzzard brothers.

His appearance wandering over brought them to momentary pause. Their small black eyes snapped at him, raising questioningly to Ruth a moment later.

'New hand?' one said to her.

Ruth turned slightly, not replying to the question.

'Deke and Ewel Buzzard,' she announced stonily to Ira. 'They've got words to say.'

'Now, hold on,' snapped Deke. 'We come to see your paw, and you say he's gone from home. Where to?'

'That I'm not saying,' she retorted. 'I wouldn't put it past you to lie in wait for him!'

'Haw, haw!' Ewel chortled. 'Not yet, but we're giving old Lamson final warning. Get out of the basin. We need this range now and aim to move in on it.'

'You don't dare,' she retorted staunchly. 'We hold possessory right here. The government will send the U.S. Marshal if we're harmed and you know it.'

'Don't spit at us!' Deke snarled. 'You know what we told your paw last time. Just once more. We'll buy the possessory range claim from him. The buildings we don't need and we'll burn them out anyhow.'

'Whether Lamson leaves or not!' declared Ewel.

'I suppose the cattle we own are to be thrown in free with the land?' Sarcasm rang in Ruth's voice.

'Dammit!' Deke shouted. 'Your paw ain't got no cattle. Them he's got a brand on have been stole. Most likely from us!'

'Now, that is a lie!' Ruth answered in outraged dignity.

'Oh, yeah?' Ewel cried. 'Gal, we'll raid this gawdammed scrawny thief's hide-out and wipe it and everybody off the map. You can tell old Lamson that for us. No more waiting on him to get some sense into his damned head!'

Ira moved one half step to the very edge of the porch beside Ruth, his blue eyes turning icy.

'You're swearing in the presence of a lady,' his voice whipped on the breeze. 'No gentleman does that.'

The Buzzard brothers stared at him incredulously a moment, faces darkening with rage over his butting in.

'Just who do you think you be?' Deke demanded hotly. 'And what lady around this thieves' ranch?'

'To hell with him!' roared Ewel, facing Ira directly. 'If this damned buttinsky don't like it, we can show him we do as we please!'

His words hardly ended before Ira fell off the porch. He

came fast, right down on top of Ewel. A choked cry escaped Ruth as she saw his arm lash out. Ewel did not spot the blow in time and struck solid to the jaw, he fell backward to the ground. A moment he sat there, braced by his arms, blinking his eyes and staring in astonishment.

Farther out their two men tensed in the saddles, waiting for the next move or orders for them to get into the scrap. Deke broke his own gaping at Ira.

'Why, you!' he started shouting and also making a slow motion at his gun. From the ground leaped Ewel suddenly, trying to get set for a quick draw.

Neither of them had much chance, not realising they faced a man who was afraid of nothing. Certainly not of threatening braggarts like the Buzzard brothers. His arm gave a twist and his sixgun landed in his hand. He also moved in on them close for self-protection. The move blocked the two mounted men from shooting at him. It prevented Deke and Ewel from going for their weapons now. Nor did the cowboy give them any opportunity to plan against him.

'Walk right on out there to your horses,' he warned low voiced. 'Make just one false move and it'll be your last.'

Strangely silent, though trembling with wrath, Deke and Ewel obeyed him. They were suddenly afraid to do less, recognising the intent to kill in this cowboy if given any more trouble. Beside their horses he brought them to a brief stop before mounting.

'You rascals might knock off Lamson, but you'd still lose,' he told them in clipped speech. 'His daughter would inherit this range claim under the law.' Letting that sink into them he added in derision, 'Or was you murdering scoundrels aiming to rub her out with the old man, too?'

Ira holstered his gun and motioned at them to mount. The brothers did so, considering him smokily from their saddles. Without being warned not to, their two riders approached on the other side.

'Where do you come into this, waddy?' Ewel wanted to know. 'And how come you threaten us with the U.S. government?'

• Suspicion lay in their eyes, and they gave him intent scrutiny.

Always cautious men, they could conceive of but one answer to this stranger cowboy jumping men of their power. He must be up to tricks. Not once did it occur to them Ira went for them solely out of decency and respect for the girl.

'Ride,' he ordered them shortly. 'And don't let me catch you in this end of the basin again.'

Deke started a furious outburst only to stop. His gaze met Ewel's beginning perplexion. Next he kicked his horse around and led the bunch from the place.

4

AFTER THEY had cleared well away from Lamson's place, Paulsen drew out the letter given him by Ruth. He read it riding along, knowing then that the original signer was not the man in the basin. He thought the matter over along the road to the rim. On the plateau he took it out again, re-read the two messages and handed the letter to his foreman riding beside him.

'Take a look at this, Pinky,' he said, 'and see what you make of it.'

The Judy ramrod, 'Pinky' Norman, got his name from reddish hair and a speckled face. A lean, hook-nosed man, clean shaven all the time, he read the words scrawled on the sheet of paper and returned it. For several minutes he pondered the matter while Paulsen gave an account of how it came into his hands.

'Well, boss,' Norman began thoughtfully, 'looks like Lynn knowed this Caldwell. Ran across him and wrote him out a straight bid to you for a job. Then Caldwell got his plans changed a mite.'

'He's that big feller on the dun horse we chased from town,' the cowman spoke reflectively. 'I missed him clean. Wonder which of the boys hit him?'

The foreman turned sideways in the saddle.

'Dunno as we'd ought to inquire into that,' he replied sombrelly. 'This Caldwell sounds kind of put out.'

'Yeah, but he aims to pick up information. Just what his words indicate. Then he hunts me. Wonder about this feller, now. Could be more reason behind Lynn's letter than asking a job for a top cowhand he knowed?'

'Could be,' Norman agreed reflectively. 'But what, for instance?'

'Uh, wonder now, is it possible this here Caldwell is some

kind of an officer and used Lynn's recommendation, a job with me, to look around before jumping?"

The foreman's homely face screwed into lines while he pondered. The matter was beyond him, one of Paulsen grabbing at a straw that maybe the strange cowboy was an officer. Finally he shrugged his shoulders.

'Looks as though we was a little previous shooting him out of town,' he observed without condemnation for what they had done.

Paulsen noticed that not at all, busy with his own thinking. He had cleaned hardcases from Shoeton because he believed it was by such groups that his cattle were rustled off the ranges. Paulsen possessed no qualms about thieves. Get rid of them the quickest means possible and no harm would be done cowmen.

'Reckon I need to get in touch with Lynn,' he finally decided. 'Might write him a letter and find out more about this Caldwell.'

Which was what Paulsen did do as soon as they reached town. Tying before the Teton he sent Norman on in with the cowboys to eat. Moseying over to the post office he got a stamped envelope and a piece of paper, writing his former wagon boss a letter of inquiry. That done he walked back to the Teton, where a meal had been ordered for him by the considerate Norman at the eating counter in back.

Since they started early the cowboys finished and strolled up front, only Norman remaining with the cowman. While they sat there Town Marshal Larry Gates approached them wearing mournful face. A chunky man, inclined to be square, the middle-aged marshal always sported a neatly pressed business suit. It did little to conceal the guns on each hip, or the double rows of cartridges on his belt that appeared in front. He sank heavily onto an empty stool to Paulsen's left.

'Town's dying,' he observed flatly. 'Railroad boom moving too far west now. Some businesses picking up and moving on with the tracks.'

'The kind Shoeton can easily spare, Larry,' Paulsen replied dourly.

'Yeah, reckon as how. But you're also driving out the newcomers who might stay, Steve.'

Promptly the cowman scowled darkly, his eyes sparking. 'Your job is to send them drifters on, Larry,' he declared icily. 'But instead you let them collect in here and next thing they do is run off Judy cattle!'

Gates chewed at his tobacco a moment.

'It ever occur to you that all them fellers you shot out of town them two days wasn't all drifters or hardcases?'

'Oh, maybe a couple shouldn't have been touched,' Paulsen admitted without worrying about it. 'But the good getting them on their way does, overcomes that.'

'Yeah, but you go make the town council see it so. I'm being criticised by local citizens for letting your bunch shoot people, tear around town and raise Cain, Steve.'

The cowman glared, and swore heavily.

'If you townies keep the place clean you'll have no argument out of me. Shucks, ain't I been requesting and demanding that for the longest?'

'Yeah, but a lot of people got the right to come to this town until it's proved different.'

Gates spoke almost gently, not wanting to arouse the cowman to too much anger. He was a power in the land for good, and his rampages against thieves kept a good many outlaws away. But not all of them. However, Paulsen continued to glare and without answering the town marshal he swung off the stool.

As Gates stood up too, Norman passed him following the cowman and winked one eye. The town marshal strolled after them towards the crowded front of the Teton. He planned to toll Paulsen over to a couple of the councilmen. Maybe they could talk sense into him. But he did not get close to contacting the cowman again.

Inside plunged a young cowboy from Judy's home ranch. Sweaty and dusty, he ploughed through to meet Paulsen and his foreman face to face. He swallowed before getting words out. 'Boss, rustlers took mor'n a hundred head of big steers off the west range!'

Paulsen asked short questions, Norman listening to the details of the theft without opening his mouth. But he knew that while they carried out Paulsen's whim here in town their

west range was left unguarded. He hadn't liked it at the time. Now he wondered mildly if some of the picking on the cowman wasn't just to get him to act up while they rustled Judy. Could be, and once more he considered this Ira Caldwell. If no more they had overdone it there. The big cowboy on the dun horse, a top hand if Norman ever saw one, had actually been coming to them. A bad mistake there. One he hoped they did not live to rue.

Right now there was action, and seething in rage Paulsen collected his men. He led out of the Teton, Norman next to him. As they mounted the foreman somberly reflected it was most likely they would never catch up with those steers again. Too much time elapsed before they could get after them.

Norman was right. After a run to Judy's home ranch, sprawled over Red valley, it was night. They packed supplies and rode on to the scene of the theft. With the first break of dawn they took the trail, and lost it before nightfall. For four more days they kept to the saddle, searching the lower plateau ranges all the way into the semi-desert. And west into the Datil's and back from the mountains northward to the rim of Rayado Basin.

On the way home Paulsen brought his worn-out crew by Shoeton. They got down before the Teton, the cowman going on to the post office carrying a sack from his saddle for the mail. Getting it, he ran through the letters selecting one in answer to his inquiry about Caldwell. The sack was tied on his saddle and he entered the saloon to find his crew scattered on personal pursuits. Standing at the bar with Norman the cowman took a drink and opened the letter.

The former wagon boss wrote two pages, describing Ira Caldwell with enthusiasm as being a man who grew up with and knew the cattle business thoroughly. He concluded, 'He is fast on the gun draw. A mean man to monkey with. It is usually fights that cause him to move on, Ira not caring for a gun-fighter's reputation.'

After reading the letter Paulsen handed it to his ramrod without comment. Norman scowled and frowned as he read the missive himself, and likewise grew very thoughtful. They had another round of drinks before discussing the reply to Paulsen's inquiry.

'Looks like our undercover man is a gun swift,' Norman drawled.

'Yeah. Wonder if he's got any dope yet and when he'll show out of the basin?'

The foreman shrugged his shoulders.

'You don't figger he's what you first thought?'

Paulsen gave the former idea further consideration and couldn't make up his mind.

'Lynn might not of knowed he was an officer. Caldwell could be smart enough, not to let anybody savvy his real business.'

Thereafter their voices dropped lower, though they did not discuss the cowboy much longer. Judy's hands began to stroll in to collect near them, waiting to go on home.

Down the bar a nondescript individual hardly noticeable leaned drunkenly on the mahogany. He was a young cowboy by appearance, in spurred boots, wearing levi pants and jacket, black hat and toting a gun. Lightly built, he weighed around a hundred and twenty pounds, was naturally referred to in camp as 'The Kid,' because of his thinness. He aspired to be big and tough, a mean man to fool with. That never being possible he resorted to trickery and cunning to make himself out a big shot. That too, so far had failed and those who knew him held the Kid in amiable contempt.

Drunk as he was the few words he overheard between Norman and the cowman struck facts in his head. They were fragments and incomplete. But what he heard there sent his imagination to spiralling, and electrified him.

When he thought about it the information he picked up could be valuable. Which was why when Judy's cowboys began gathering he knew that overhearing any more careless conversation ended. The small cowboy eased out of the way down from the bar. Shortly he slipped to the front door, paying no attention to the Judy outfit, and left the saloon. Getting his horse tied on the street he quit town in a hurry, taking a trail northwest.

The long ride whipped the whisky out of him and recovering fully he planned just what he would tell. All of it was based on the overheard words and he guessed the Buzzard brothers

would sit up and take notice when he told them. Anticipation of gaining their favour brought on the exhilarating feeling of strutting.

He hit the rim, descended and put his horse into a gallop across Rayado Basin, straight into 3 B in the middle of the afternoon. The barns, sheds and many corrals formed a blocky line on the north side of the premises. The crew's quarters, a boxing-plank elongated building with cubicle-like rooms in it, stood beyond the windmill and watering troughs. He rode past them to the shed at the barn, yanked off his saddle and turned his horse into the stalls.

He came around, throwing a glance at the cook shack below the crew's quarters, and next to the unpainted four-room wooden dwelling of the bachelor brothers. The sun glinted on the west side of the tin roof, and it would be hot in there. For a couple of minutes he thought about grabbing a bite to eat. But the absent riders would be in before long and the cranky cook would argue that it was too near supper time to be feeding anybody extra.

Stretching out, he strode rapidly for the front door across the porch of the plain house. No walk, no yard or even a growing plant around it. Sun warped and wind bent during winter storms. If he had all the money the Buzzards did, he would fix up around here a bit.

He entered through an open door into what would have been the parlour in a home. A big room, fitted with a few busted chairs, and an iron cot with blankets on it. In one corner lay piled several saddles and some harness. A greasy topped, small wooden table occupied the nominal centre of the room.

Off the cot, rubbing sleep from his eyes raised Simpson Buzzard. The oldest of the brothers, he sported a gray moustache. The same graying hair came down on both sides of his ears very nearly covering them. The shock strung away from his head except for the thinning spot on top. Better known as 'Simp,' a contraction of his name, he was big and bossed Deke and Ewel. Simp was moreover, the brains of the outfit and a hard man to deal with.

His eyes started flaring up on recognising the thin cowboy and he was annoyed at being awakened from his afternoon nap.

'Well, whatta you want, Buttons?' he grated between tobacco-stained teeth. 'Not with the horse herd, for hell's sake?'

'Naw, I been fooling around town, Simp.'

He was stopped before able to continue by, 'Whatta you figger we pay you for, Buttons Stover, to waste time in town!' Simp fairly howled that.

Stover gulped twice, realising that Simp did not yet know Ewel canned him the day before.

'Hold on, Simp, I got something to tell you,' he managed to get in quickly. 'How come I was in town don't matter, since I've found out that Steve Paulsen has got an officer working the basin!'

Simp blinked his eyes, staring at him as he considered the words before deciding he heard them right.

'How drunk you be yet?' he demanded suspiciously.

'Haw, haw!' Stover chortled. 'Simp, I'm sober as a judge. I found this out and come running. Figgered you'd want to know the real lowdown on this Caldwell that Deke and Ewel squawk about.'

Simp gave him careful scrutiny, trying to decide for himself how much the very undependable cowboy could be relied on to tell the truth just once. But Stover was excited, suppressing it, and so soon after obtaining whatever it was he knew, might come somewhere close to the facts.

'Spit it out,' Simp told him.

'This Caldwell, he's some kind of an undercover officer,' Stover took the plunge. 'Maybe federal, or some cowmen's association detective, dunno. But he's sure enough an officer and also a gunfighter. They're expecting him to come out any day now with the dope on whatever it was he's been sent into the basin to get.'

'I reckon we don't need to guess, do we, Simp?'

Stover halted then, gloating grin spread on his thin lips. He'd shown them now. Proved Buttons Stover was the real goods. A valuable man they needed for something besides keeping a bunch of horses thrown together in one remuda. Huh, that was a nighthawk's work anyhow.

, Rising slowly, Simp got out a plug of tobacco and bit into it.

While his eyes rested on Stover he thought fast. It was entirely possible that Paulsen had done exactly as he heard now. Indeed, if he finally realised how open his west range was. Could be the tough guy Deke and Ewel wanted to go kill at Lamson's place was an officer brought in by Paulsen. He could even be a federal marshal. That gunfighter part was provable, for hadn't the cowboy drawn on Deke and Ewel? Besides they described him as a would-be-tough running that windy on them. Now Simp changed his mind over their angry ranting. Maybe this Caldwell was the real article, and his bravery against them could issue from the fact that he was an officer.

'How'd you find out this?' Simp asked quietly.

That was Stover's invitation to strut, and he did. With gestures and many ambiguous details he explained how he saw Paulsen and his ramrod at the bar engaged in whispered conversation. How he eased in when he heard Caldwell mentioned, and thereafter their discussion of him. He said they had also read a letter after which Norman asked the cowman how soon he thought they would have the dope on the Basin from this man.

Simp read the make-believe tough man Stover, and thought of sniffing his breath before charging him with lying. He changed his mind because Stover's anxious eagerness to please, his ready delivery of the information caused him to believe that it was true. He strolled over to the door, standing to expectorate a brown stream onto hard ground outside.

'Buttons,' his voice was matter-of-fact when he turned back into the room, 'grab your horse and beat it to Indian Flats. Tell Cheyenne to hold up everything until further orders. Not to make one move against the Lamson place. Wait until we ride over there. That may be a couple of days or so yet. You got all that?'

Elated and bursting with the importance of being accepted as a confidant, Stover repeated his instructions. He'd show the members of 3 B's crew who belittled him with the kid stuff now. But in a measure he was disappointed also. Other than orders Simp did not take him into his confidence on just how important his information was. Stover could guess that it was real, and this business with old Dave Lamson he had heard.

discussed after Dcke and Ewel were run off by the stranger cowboy they'd heard was Ira Caldwell.

Simp never made the mistake of talking too much. Of letting his hirelings learn all about his dealings. He gave them just enough to do what they were told only when necessary, and let well enough alone.

'I done this right, didn't I, Simp?' Stover asked, waiting hopefully for commendation. Some proof he was now a member of the trusted bunch. 'When I heard, sure tried to get more, figgering you'd want it.'

Simp inclined his head.

'Mighty glad of it, Buttons. Not much good without more, and I'll soon have that. By the way, when you deliver them orders to Cheyenne you can stay at Indian Flats.'

Saying airily, 'Okay, Simp!' Stover left the house.

5

STOVER WENT directly to the cook shack, and said it was orders from Simp to feed him. He got a meal without argument, and threw his saddle on a red roan 3 B horse. Coming out he quit the ranch at a gallop just in case Simp might be watching. A couple of miles away on the main basin trail he slowed. Still better than an hour's sun left. The fact set him to thinking, and in new found freedom of imagined importance he decided to do whatever he wanted. Plenty of time to get on to Indian Flats.

Down the Basin on the south side lived Sophie Jaltz. He had been there a few times, stopping for a drink of water. The big tow-headed woman, the widow of a man who formerly ran a saloon in town, had pale blue eyes and a solemn face. Few people ever saw her smile, but the bigness of her held a strange fascination for Stover. Seldom did she say more than two words to him either. Most of the time she simply stood watching, scarce hearing his wordy excuse for halting.

In a way she was a thorn in the 3 B's side. So likely she viewed the outfit's riders with suspicion. Stover wasn't the only one who tried to make up to the widow who still was short of thirty, homesteaded right in good 3 B grass. Probably she managed to hang on because she was a woman. And she lived alone, doing all the necessary work herself.

Now when he thought about Sophie, Stover's throat got tight and he hit on a means of making a hit with her. Riding aside into the brush he scouted until locating a fat yearling steer. Moving up beside the animal he leaned over to shoot it in the head.

The steer flopped down, and dismounting Stover got out his long bladed knife. Bothering with no butchering job at all he simply skinned out one hind quarter. Cutting it out at the knee and hip joints expertly, he hung it up to drip while the day ended and starlit night covered the basin.

The Buzzard brothers would raise the roof if they knew this. But likely no one would ever find remains of the carcass here in the brush. Nevertheless, he took precautions against staining his saddle with blood. Wrapping the small quarter in his slicker he tied it on behind the saddle and took a direct course on for Sophie Jaltz's place.

The light came into being through the junipers before he reached a fence corner, turning down it. Sophie Jaltz, much to the admiration of some 3 B riders, former dirt farmers themselves, had done well here. She had forty acres in corn this year, and about sixty in grain. All planted and worked by herself.

Stover rode the fence to the small barn and corral, turning around some rusted cultivators towards the light. It came from the open kitchen door and window of the small frame house. Drawing up at the yard fence, the sweet odour of blooming flowers from the beds hanging in the air, he dropped off.

Two dogs barked and ran out to the fence. Sophie Jaltz appeared framed in the light watching him dismounted untying the quarter of beef from the saddle. Not until he cleared for the board gate did she recognise him.

Her low voice in command brought the dogs away. Stover came in, halting beyond the door holding the meat.

'We had too much beef in camp, ma'm,' he began. 'Since I was coming by your place, reckoned maybe you'd like it. No sense letting it spoil.'

She appeared to hesitate long, but finally said, 'Thank you. I'll cover it on the porch.'

'Shucks, I'll hang it up, ma'm!' he hastened.

He went onto the small lean-to porch, where Sophie brought a cleanly laundered flour sack and a white cotton rope. Stover wrapped the quarter, tied on the rope and throwing it over a rafter drew it higher than the dogs could reach. It would be cool there and keep until used.

He turned next to wash pan and water bucket on the shelf at the end. Stover washed his hands, drying them on a towel she held out in silence. Afterwards he hung it back on the nail.

'Come in, please,' she said in her curiously always husky voice.

He followed her into the lighted kitchen, not realising that she did not thank him for the gift of meat. This was the first time she ever invited him into the house, though. He preened himself with a fixed grin, deciding that at last he was making time with the big woman.

The small kitchen was clean as a pin, and comfortable. Stover sat down at the red oilcloth-covered table where she told him to, placing coffee and cake before him.

'I could cook you a meal if you haven't had supper,' she offered.

'Why, ma'm, this here's wonderful!' he enthused. 'Done et before. This is toppins and I got a long ride to make yet. Thanky kindly.'

'The 3 B pitched a camp near?'

'No, ma'm,' he shook his head, unaware that a frown of worry died on her face. 'It's some distance, but I'm taking important orders from Simp himself to Indian Flats.'

A few moments she observed Stover forking chunks of cake at his teeth, some of the white frosting sticking to the side of his loose mouth.

'Kinny stopped by the fence this afternoon,' she remarked idly. 'Said you'd been let go.'

Stover paused drinking coffee to regard the round, big blue eyes in the tanned face. Somehow they seemed without expression. Yet the amply proportioned woman always gave him a thrill just looking at her. But that bragging, girl-chasing Kinny now. Thinking about him made Stover angry.

'Hunh, him!' he said and boasted, 'better watch his step. Any time I'm of a mind to, Simp would fire him on my word. It'll be him riding out, if he ain't careful. Kinny's a little on the lazy side, and don't carry out his orders none 'too well.'

He didn't know where Kinny worked now, an uneasy feeling striking him. It could be at Indian Flats, where he would run into him again. Whatever Kinny was supposed to be doing, it wasn't in this part of the basin. So he had come lolly-gagging around here making up to Sophie behind his back. That she accepted the meat and invited him into the kitchen to

eat, gave Stover more ideas. In his mind she was his girl now and such as Kinny had better pay a mind to that.

Sophie said, 'Roundup at Indian Flats?' Her guileless eyes still on him.

'No, just the usual work going on,' he replied, and remembered his former statement. 'Got some changes to make over there,' he continued, forcing his voice to sound unduly confidential. 'How come Simp told me to get over there and take care of it.'

He didn't know that Sophie was well aware that he had never handled any work for 3 B other than horse wrangling. A job which the cowboys claimed he couldn't do, let alone other punchers' work. Stover had never run with the big 3 B crews.

Finished with cake and coffee he remained, expanding as he rolled a smoke. Sophie said not one more word to him, which did not bother him at all. He talked on, mostly about himself and the sudden influence of his job with the 3 B. Half an hour later he bade adieu and treading on air went to his horse.

Riding away to the north, Stover trotted the roan, dreaming some of the immediate future. He thought he enjoyed favour of the big, handsome woman now and it wouldn't be long until she'd be hanging around his neck.

He reached the upper trail, turning east on it and came in after midnight. Indian Flats was a series of small parks separated and surrounded by granite crags. The spaces in between, except the grass area, was filled by juniper timber. As he entered them Stover encountered cattle, and in the starlight could see that some were plain and browned, recently burned brands. Or burned over brands, which was more correct.

Riding at a trot he cleared two such glades, always referred to as 'flats,' and arrived in a centre one. The north side contained the several small, connected corrals. The two cabins stood beyond them concealed in the timber.

Around behind them was a pole corral where horses were kept, and there he put his mount. His arrival brought the men in the first cabin awake. But there was only Latt Kinny and Arch Quinn there. They called out as he entered, and Stover knocked a can off the square table near the stove while lighting

the lamp. As the beams grew the two returned to their wall bunks, the lean, adam's-appled Quinn considering him bleakly. Kinny looked funny in his underwear and Stover, seating himself at the table to smoke, wished Sophie could see how ridiculous he was. The square-jawed Kinny was a couple of years older than Stover, and built like a wedge. He hated him and filled with egotism over his new association with Simp Buzzard, allowed himself the indulgence of inflated power.

Quinn studying the small man felt an odd urge to curse at him. Instead he asked, 'What brings you here, Buttons?'

Stover countered with, 'Where's Cheyenne?'

'Gone back where he's supposed to be.'

'The hell! Then I've got to go on to Lamson's place.'

Kinny sat up on his bunk staring through the lamp light at him.

'I reckon you don't,' he growled. 'A wet car like you ain't got no business monkeying around over there any more than us.'

Stover's face froze on him. Cigarette smoke curled upward from the twist in his mouth and suddenly he wished that he could handle a sixgun like this Caldwell they heard about. It would be extreme pleasure to draw and blast Kinny down.

'I reckon I'll have the say about it,' Stover announced in as heavy a voice as he could muster. But it still retained a squeaky sound.

Quinn lanced upward off his bunk, walking over barefooted in his pants.

'What gives, Buttons?' he asked in a flat voice that gave warning of no foolishness.

'It's on account of what happened that Simp sends me to get hold of Cheyenne,' Stover replied, and hated himself for giving in.

'What?'

Kinny appeared from the bunks, standing at Quinn's shoulder to eye the small man curiously.

'Simp told me to get hold of Cheyenne and give him some new orders,' Stover said. 'I reckon if Simp wanted anybody else to know he'd of said so.'

Kinny rocked on his feet, a smirk brightening his face.

'The Kid is taking on airs,' he observed. 'Acting like he's big people!'

'You was supposed to of been let go,' Quinn said to Stover. 'Okay, Buttons. You show back in the outfit. How come?'

'Yeah? Well, I happen to be right in the saddle. I'm handling a special deal for Simp. It don't make a damn whether you believe it, like it or not!' Red ranged through Stover's cheeks over the manner in which they refused to be impressed by his new estate.

After a period of silence while the pair surveyed him it was Kinny who drawled, 'Let's pants him, Arch. Betcha The Kid is sneaking through and just playing big shot before he rides north in the morning!'

'Go ahead, make jokes!' Stover flared. He came upward uncertainly, angry and without thinking about it suddenly kicked the backless rawhide chair out of the way.

Kinny drawled mockingly, 'My, my! The Kid's acting like he's throwing a little weight.'

Stover had changed all right. No longer cringingly meek or ingratiatingly blustery by turns as they had known him before.

He said now, 'All right, pour it on. But it ain't you got to ride on to Lamson's this late at night!'

'Haw, haw!' Kinny snickered loudly, 'Banty size kid hates himself! Wouldn't leave a grease spot was I to hit him.'

Quinn seeing the spurt of wrath that glinted Stover's eyes said shortly, 'Knock it off, Kinny.' To Stover, 'Buttons, it'll be me decide whether or not we risk somebody going to Cheyenne at Lamson's. Okay, what's the message Simp is sending him?'

'Dunno 'bout that,' Stover replied. 'Simp told me to give these orders to Cheyenne. I don't and you know how mad he'll get if he don't like it.'

'Yeah, and the one big order is nobody risks them other boys' position with Lamson by getting seen around there. Okay, so Simp sends Cheyenne a new set of instructions. What are they?'

'Well, I told you,' Stover began doggedly, his upper lip beginning to hang petulantly.

'I'll handle it with Simp. He won't say a word nohow. Because I'm boss here, Buttons.'

Stover hesitated, but the cold determination in Quinn warned him the stringy outlaw was going to get mean. So he gave Simp's instructions, stating them exactly as received. Before he finished Kinny surprised him by exhibiting concern, eyeing him with a different expression. No longer contemptuous.

They remained quiet so long Stover said, 'Since you're boss I'm hitting the hay. It's your responsibility now.' Kinny even moved gracefully out of his way to let him pass for the bunks.

Quinn walked over to right the backless chair, slumping onto it. Kinny remained standing watching him, and opened his mouth.

'In some ways this don't make sense.'

'No?' Quinn lifted gaze at him. 'It's damned bad, if you ask me. No wonder Simp sent whoever he could get his hands on the quickest.'

'How bad?' Kinny replied evenly. 'No strike at Lamson's was to be made until Deke and Ewel come to get in on it. Them was orders.'

'Oh, that ain't the trouble. It's this Caldwell being some kind of an officer. Buttons is right, somebody has got to go in there to-night to tip them off. Cheyenne's gonna be a mite mad.'

Kinny laughed, retreating for his bunk.

'Send The Kid. He wants to go plumb bad!'

'Not me, now,' Stover declared from the bunk where he lay, having shucked off his clothes and crawled into blankets. 'Too late.'

'No, can't send him,' Quinn said abstractedly. 'Can't take chances on the messenger being caught. This undercover officer is most likely a spooky gent. I'll take a whirl at it myself. Just about got enough time before daylight.'

That settled the matter. Quinn completed dressing, left the cabin and saddled his horse in the woods' corral. Not until he hit the trail up the creek for Lamson's did he remember something else. He wished that he had asked Stover how Simp got

hold of the information. Yet on further thought it didn't matter. Even mere suspicion of the strange cowboy certainly called for warning to Cheyenne to be on guard. This sneak, he thought, had been around long enough to get the dope on them if he wasn't plumb blind.

6

WHEN QUINN rode south he had a silent stalker. For the past two days Ira scouted the area surrounding Indian Flats. This night Stover passed him going in, so sneaked as close as he dared. When Quinn rode away he retreated to his horse to follow.

The man ate up distance fast and when he hit the cattle trail short of Lamson's, Ira rode around to the back of the barn. He hunkered against the near corral fence watching through the horizontal poles when Quinn appeared afoot after leaving his horse in the timber. The man stole for the back of the cabin, coming around close to the wall for the open door.

No light came into being, for this was a surreptitious visit. A rider at Indian Flats, then this one coming here, indicated an important message from elsewhere. Ira could only guess, and put his horse away.

Easing to the front he waited there until Quinn appeared alone. The man left as he entered the premises. This time he brought a couple of barks from the dog. Then once again silence reigned over the place in the near dawn.

The healing leg allowed Ira more freedom of movement now. Instead of going directly over to the house he circled the open through the timber to the south end. From there it was a simple matter to sneak inside to his old shakedown pallet without risk of being seen.

Ruth awoke him passing through the north room to build a fire in the cook stove. Dressing hurriedly, he entered the kitchen. She turned a smile at him and the gladness with which she found his return caused his throat to clog a little.

'I am happy that you came back,' she said.

'Got in late,' he replied. 'Hope I didn't wake anybody.'

'Oh, no, but I heard the dog bark before dawn.'

'I heard that, too,' he returned. 'Except that the dog doesn't bark at me no more.'

She failed to be interested in that incident further. Then Lamson appeared, stomping along, and Ira went with him to do the chores. This morning the three hardcases did not show until they were on the way to the house, Lamson carrying the morning milking.

Ira missed the sharp inspection he came in for, but not Cheyenne's overdone, 'Well, well! So you come back instead of sloping?'

Ira nodded his head. They were absent somewhere when he rode off. But he had obtained food from Ruth on the excuse that he wanted to look around the country. Nor had that brought any question from her.

From there on, however, Ira watched the three hardcases whenever he could without being observed. It was how he discovered their hostility, the sudden very intent interest in him.

Breakfast started out as the usual conversationless one. But at the end Cheyenne addressed himself pointedly at Ira.

'See anything worth reporting on your ride?'

Tiny and Pete paused to listen while pretending no interest. Again Ira sensed the coldness from them, realising that for some reason they were after him. Danger hovered, though he doubted they would bring on a fight in the house.

'Started for town,' Ira replied casually, when in fact he had gone to the upper creek first. 'Then changed my mind, Could be more trouble for me there.' He wanted them to think by his words that he might have spent his time on the plateau.

'Hope you're enjoying your visit,' Cheyenne answered shortly, latent iron in his voice. 'About ready to ride on?'

Ira gave the right amount of thoughtfulness before shrugging his shoulders.

'Would like a job. Hear about this 3 B outfit. You reckon a man could get on there?'

Cheyenne's eyes suddenly narrowed and he almost grinned, mouth quirking a little to hide it.

'Now, that could be. Hear the 3 B's a nice big outfit to work for. Why don't you go over there and ask?'

As though he then decided the matter Ira nodded his head.

'Reckon I got to start in somewhere.'

No more was said before the hardcases left the house. Later when Ira went to the barn their horses stood saddled before the shed. They were inside and so quietly did he pass they did not hear his steps. As he let himself into the stables Tiny's harsh voice lifted clearly.

'The lying rat! Him saying he'd go ask for a job at 3 B. Hell, him having that run-in with Deke and Ewel, and saying it!'

So they knew, and Ira somehow doubted that the incident was repeated by Ruth. On the other hand, before dire suspicion aroused, he remembered that she surely told her father. So after all it could have come to them through the old man's careless repeating.

Saddling the dun, Ira prepared to come out. But the hardcases' riding away then caused him to wait inside the stables. They headed for the creek, disappearing into the timber. When they were out of the way he led his horse from the barn, going over to the corral to tie.

Lamson showed up and he was angry, grabbing his bridle to catch a horse out of the barn. His eyes were smoky when he returned to saddle up.

'Wanted to work the south creek to-day,' he grated. 'Them fellers don't seem to pay no 'tention to who's boss around here!'

Ira kept his face flat, knowing then the night messenger's visit caused the hardcases to leave on some business more personal than doing any job for Lamson. He had the sensation again that danger lay over the place, wondering if the hardcases were no farther away than hiding in the creek timber, waiting for him.

Lamson ready to ride, forked up but paused to glance at Ira speculatively.

'You wanta work the south creek?'

'I'm riding, Mr. Lamson.'

The old man's expression fell and he tightened querulously.

'Maybe about time. We ain't keeping no hotel around here!'

Angry, he sent his bay horse into a gallop for the creek. Ira cast a look after him and walked over to the house. Inside the kitchen Ruth finished with work, stood regarding him from the lower end of the table.

'Ma'm, I appreciate you folks' hospitality,' he began, and hated himself for parting with her 'I wonder now, could I pay for my meals and bed?'

She ignored that, her face paling.

'I wish you wouldn't go,' her voice came huskily. 'I—I've been afraid the day would come when you'd ride away.'

For a few moments he could find no adequate words, considering her levelly. Her eyes closed shyly, and he forgot to mention the pay a second time.

'I won't be going far, Ruth,' he replied huskily. 'I'll be around but I've been imposing on you folks long enough.'

'It hasn't been that.' She lifted wide gaze on him, inclining her head. 'There would be trouble with those three men if you stayed longer?'

'I don't think so, ma'm.'

'You do too,' she insisted. 'I could tell it this morning. They are after you.'

'Well, they have changed. I wonder why?'

Since it was a question she shook her head.

'You haven't had any argument with them?'

'No, ma'm.'

He went back to his horse, regretting departure. In the saddle he did not trust himself to glance at the house. Taking the wagon road west he followed it only around the first bend of timber. Going off to the north he curved around the barn and corrals onto the creek far enough to locate the fresh trail of the hardcases. They had not loitered, passing on downstream in a hurry. Ira took their trace until it came off in a slant directly for Indian Flats.

He halted there to make a cigarette. When it was lighted he returned over part of his own trail to the wagon road. It was a very peculiar business in the basin, he thought once more. Something crooked going on and the hardcases were hiding out with Lamson, working him some way to their own selfish ends. Around Indian Flats he had not seen them. Only con-

nected them because of the night rider. So Indian Flats was a rustler diggings, the fresh brands meaning much to Ira for he could read them like a book.

On the other hand all this was someone else's business. None of his. So he wandered west through the southern half of the basin, correctly surmising that movement of cattle occurred only in the upper section. The rebranded cattle meant some had been moved in lately.

Here where he rode the morning out grazed 3 B cattle. None of the original brands had ever been triggered with like the steers at Indian Flats. Ira was just looking, having the knowledge of a rustler operation and the strange situation at Lamson's place to go on. He would pull out to Shoeton this day, yet failed to make up his mind whether to contact Paulsen or not. That despite the cryptic message given him through Ruth.

It was near noon when he broke a thick stand of timber to come onto a fenced field of corn. Lamson once mentioned the Jaltz place, yet it was still something of a surprise to find it here. He rode to the fence, looking at the corn.

He was not aware of anyone being close. Until the cultivator behind two black mules appeared at the upper end of the rows next to him. On the seat driving towards him was a big person in overalls, a blue shirt and with a wide-brimmed straw hat drooping down about the face. Not until the cultivator came even with him did he realise with a start that a woman handled the cultivator. That would be Sophie Jaltz, and now her head lifted fast and she stared at him over the distance in passing.

Ira felt confused and embarrassed by his stare at her. At the lower turnrow Sophie glanced at the sun and dismounted to unhook the mules. Ira rode over, opening the wire gate for her and when she would have gone on without less he fell in behind.

'Ma'm, I'm sorry about popping out on you like that,' he began when they arrived before the small barn. 'Was just surprised to find this here mighty pretty place.'

Her head came up and she considered him gravely.

'You're not a 3 B rider?'

'No, ma'm. Just passing through the basin. Here, let me put your team on feed. I'll be riding then.'

She knew after study that the cowboy was hardly the type that worked for the Buzzard brothers. And to her own surprise even, she nodded her head, allowing him to take over.

'Come to the house for a meal before you go,' she invited.

Ira ground tied to separate the mules and secure the lines wrapped short on the hames. That done he took them inside the shed, found grain and fed. He led his dun down to the yard, over beyond the fence corner onto grass. Noise rattled from the kitchen and when he turned to the porch she appeared to hang up a quarter of wrapped beef.

'Wash and come sit,' she said, and very nearly smiled.

Sophie was lonesome, far more so than she had ever been in her life. This man was a gentleman. She could read the marks on him, so she had no fear of having to fend him off. He would not take advantage of her lonely situation or force his presence on her.

The meat was frying, warmed over biscuits in the pan when he entered and she started setting a place for him at the table.

'This beef,' she said and did smile faintly, 'is probably slow elk.'

He grinned amiably, knowing she meant a piece of stolen meat. She turned the big slabs in the pan.

'I didn't slow elk it myself,' she explained. 'A 3 B rider was by last night and left it. Said they had too much in camp and I was welcome to it. When he rode on I found this meat still blood warm. He butchered it himself and I hope the Buzzards' don't catch him.'

'Hmm,' he chuckled a little. 'I see you got suitors about?'

She nodded her head, a cloud passing over the frank, wide face.

'Most unwelcome people. I don't put up with them long. This small cowboy seems a homeless, kind of odd person. He's been around the most.'

The food was ready and they sat down to eat.

'I don't need 3 B meat,' she said. 'Have fifty head of my own cattle running around the farm.'

‘Yes, ma’m. You do right well here, I reckon?’

She agreed quickly to that, giving some information about the crops she raised and products sold in town.

‘See your fields are fenced,’ he observed when she slowed with nothing to say. ‘Don’t have much trouble with 3 B cattle, I guess. They do any driving through here?’

‘No, no one does,’ she answered. ‘The cowboy last night. Said he was on his way to Indian Flats.’

Sophie did not catch his quick start. A few minutes later he mentioned that cowboy, describing him enough so that Sophie nodded her head.

‘That was him. Did you run into him yesterday, or last night in camp?’

‘No, ma’m. Saw him at a distance.’

The rider who entered Indian Flats had come from this direction. However, he could easily have made the jog to the Jaltz farm en route from 3 B. He reflected about that while Sophie talked on. She spoke in a low, even voice, of establishing the farm. She was a hard worker, a determined woman. Albeit she was lonely too, a decent, liberal and kind-hearted person.

Finally when she did stop she smiled and added, ‘Here I’ve kept you from your journey, and I need to finish cultivating that corn this afternoon!’

‘It’s been right interesting visiting you, ma’m.’

As she gathered up the dishes he prepared to help, but she said that the washing would be done after supper. Both stood behind the table near the stove when riders galloped in at the yard fence. They flashed through his view, three of them. But so fast he failed to recognise one of the Buzzard brothers.

Sophie tensed, not moving until they dismounted, clattering inside the yard to the lean-to porch. Their boots thudded to a halt and Ewel Buzzard’s voice raised angrily.

‘Pull down that haunch of meat!’

Her face paling, Sophie crossed the floor in thick soled brogans to the door. She stopped there, waiting with back to Ira.

‘Ha!’ Ewel exulted. ‘That there quarter will fit right onto the carcass where it damned sure grew!’

His voice stopped as he wheeled to stride for the door. Sophie retreated inside the room before his belligerence. Ewel came onto the threshold, his fiery gaze on her, not discovering Ira immediately. Behind him framed his two cowboys.

'So you turned real nester!' Ewel exploded wrathfully. 'Eating cowman's beef!'

'You're mistaken, Mr. Buzzard,' Sophie returned firmly. 'I happen to raise my own meat.'

'Don't lie to me!' Ewel thundered outrageously. 'Varmints led us into the brush to the carcass, beefed sometime yesterday. We followed horse tracks here. You sure are wasteful of another man's beef ain't you, leaving all that carcass to rot!'

From the side Ira drawled as he moved forward, 'Seems like you never learn to speak respectfully to a lady.'

Ewel froze momentarily with his mouth open. When his eyes took on sudden rage, beyond that of thinking he tracked a beefer down, Sophie spoke again.

'The quarter probably came from where you say it did, Mr. Buzzard. One of your cowboys rode in after dark last night. He claimed they had too much meat in camp and left it here. I couldn't know he lied, though I kept the meat to be polite and let it go at that.'

'So you're still hanging around?' Ewel recovering his aplomb, said to Ira. 'Sneaking around or just visiting?'

There it was again, a sudden change and badly concealed hate that had been true of the hardcases at Lamson's that morning. Through Ewel's attitude he sensed that the cowman would start no trouble with him, though it was much against his desire. Ira nodded his head.

'Kind of a purty basin.'

'Hang around. Maybe you'll like some of it for a permanent place of your own,' Ewel sneered. 'Which means, mister, that we don't like sneaks in the basin!'

'I'll suit myself as to staying.'

This was something more to go on. Ewel believed that he was snooping in the Basin. For a fact he had been, yet not connected with whatever it was Ewel suspicioned.

'The meat, Mr. Buzzard,' Sophie took up brittlely. 'I'd be willing to pay for the quarter.'

'Never mind.' His gaze snapped back to her. 'Who was that 3 B rider?'

'I don't know.'

'Just as I figgered from the first!' He hinted darkly at lying again.

'I don't know your men and I wish they wouldn't stop here at all,' Sophie declared positively.

Ira cut in drily, 'If you examined the ground where you found the carcass as you claim, you know a man's boots made tracks while doing the butchering.'

Ewel's attention returned to him.

'So you're butting in here too, wise guy?'

'I'm telling you. This lady didn't kill that steer, as she says. You know from the boot marks it was a man. Just coming around to pick on people you figger can't fight back, as usual?'

In fact Ewel had inspected the boot marks, though not until now had he considered them as being definitely made by a man. Heat roiled through him and the beefing matter already off his hands, he wanted to tie into the cowboy. All that kept him from it was Simp's warning to play along until they definitely identified him as an officer of the law.

'You're gonna get in my hair once too often,' Ewel snorted, turned and led his two cowboys from the porch.

Puzzled, Sophie withdrew and Ira moved outside to lean against a roof post watching the 3 B men. Mounting, they struck south directly into the timber. That course would take them to the plateau rim.

Sophie, a little worried, but not on her own account, was ready to return to work. Getting his horse, Ira overtook her at the barn, dismounting to bring the mules out for her. While they were hitched together again she faced him.

'You've had an argument with them before?'

'Yes, ma'm, at the Lamson place. Ruth was there alone and I happened by. Ewel, Deke and a couple of their men rode in to threaten old man Lamson. He was gone, and they started taking it out on her.'

She said, 'Oh,' and picked up the driving lines.

'You won't have any more trouble with them, will you?' he spoke going to his horse.

'No, I'm sure not. But you?'

'Seems like I fell on them before to-day, ma'm.'

He watched her driving the mule team away, striding with the even pace of an athletic man. Ira turned to his horse, swinging into the saddle. Riding south past the house into the junipers he checked the tracks of the 3 B men. Not far after they struck out in a direct line. For to Ira it seemed Ewel knocked off what started to be a long harangue too abruptly.

There could be a reason for it, and he sat his saddle trying to listen for any sound other than the chattering blue jays in the timber. It didn't come and he turned east, riding at a bare walk. Their suspicions of him might lead to the setting of an ambush, or determination if he traced them from the farm.

'I'd better quit monkeying into this business,' he warned himself. 'It's going to bust wide open and somebody will get killed.'

A few paces later the dun horse slowed to a complete halt, head lifted with pointed ears. Somewhere to the right Ira heard the stomp of a horse on the ground followed by the rattle of bridle bits.

Ewel was pretty clumsy at this kind of stalking. Ira grinned. They had not only waited for him, but close enough to spot him when he left the farm. Now they tried to follow parallel to his course for purposes of their own. Moving on at the same slow walk Ira went on guard against a sudden charge until a convenient clump barred the way. At the same pace speed he cut to the far side of it, and a couple of minutes later repeated the manoeuvre. That should hide him completely from them, so he curved north to get away from them. Intervening junipers then forced him all the way around west to his former course.

A few moments he paused to reconnoitre. No evidence of the 3 B men now. They would have advanced before realising he wasn't near them. Quick search should follow and losing him, Ewel likely would get impatient and start a rush.

Ira headed on south and sure enough, ran across their divided trails moving east as he had been doing earlier. He rode on another half-mile, and put the dun into a fast trot towards the distant wall of the plateau.

The grassy glades between clumps of junipers grew more open, and they stopped him. Here a few cattle branded JJ grazed. Sophie Jaltz's. Ira turned eastward, not liking the larger openings at all. They sent him more to the north and rounding the edge of one he crossed another.

From the northwest a rider crashed through brush. In too much of a hurry. Checking fast, Ira did not understand how they could have spotted him again. Yet, they were certainly after him, and Ewel had given way to panic they might lose their intended victim. Riders spread far apart through the timber and Ira could hear the clatter of hooves now.

One rider below got past his position, Ira halting beside a heavy stand of brush. A second was close on the west and for that reason he sputted due north at a fast trot, wary against creating any sound to guide them. He reasoned they would race on through, over-anxious about his escape and theorising he made for the road out of the basin.

The whereabouts of the third rider bothered him, and then the 3 B cowboy appeared directly ahead in an opening between two stands of junipers. His gun was coming to firing position. Rapidly closing of that distance disconcerted the cowboy. His bullet went wild and firing on the charge, Ira saw him spill out of the saddle. His mount wheeled away to the right.

He rolled past and hit the brush on the other side. Over a shoulder he saw that the cowboy had been wounded, and falling, lost his gun. But he was not seriously so, crawling on hands and knees in an effort to locate his weapon and to resume the action.

Ira moved to the right behind another screen and quit the saddle, hearing riders dashing for the scene of the shooting. Afoot, he stole to the screen of brush, able to peer through next to the ground. Ewel arrived first, then the other cowboy. They walked over, helping the wounded one to his feet. Ewel rent

the air with a few curses when the cowboy told him that he did not bring their quarry down.

After that they quieted until only a mumble of voices echoed. The second cowboy caught up the loose horse and the wounded one was mounted. Ewel and the other followed suit, turning west through the open grass land siding him.

Further pursuit of Ira by them ended. Nor had they been in sufficient force to accomplish it in the first place. Ira felt tired now, returning to his horse where he loitered to get a cigarette made. Had they come for him from pure meanness, or did Ewel think he had a good reason to kill him? The answer to that puzzled Ira. Finally he quit thinking about it. Again in the saddle he rode leisurely eastward until reaching the basin road south.

He took it, jogging along after inspecting the dusty road bed for fresh sign. It was the quick lifting of the dun's head that warned him of new danger. When he looked at the plateau rim, the head and shoulders of a man appeared against the cloudless blue sky. He stood in the cap rock west of the break onto the plateau, and then dropped out of sight almost at once.

Ira muttered dark words and said to himself, 'Dad-blamed dry-gulching country!'

Ahead stood a point of timber and riding the left-hand side of the road until it covered him, Ira reined off into the brush. Dismounting he slipped forward to where he could see the rim. For half an hour he watched like a hawk before the spy reappeared. This time, obviously puzzled about the vanished rider below, he stood higher, walking towards the road. Presently a second hiding man came into being to the east. They stood observing the Basin below for several minutes before wandering back into concealed positions.

Ira was very much annoyed. Patiently the pair up there, if no more waited beyond the rim with them, were posted for a long stay. They watched for someone and Ira wasn't going to take the risk that it was not himself.

Fortunately he was east of the road in the part of the basin where towering rocks and isolated masses dotted the timber. Still, it had to be slow movement getting out of there. Since a mounted man is easier to spot he walked leading his horse.

It was hot in the afternoon sun, little breeze blowing. Although he progressed steadily for the distant creek, towards the close of day his injured leg began to pain and stiffen again.

Eventually he halted altogether, waiting until sundown. In the dusk he started riding on, convinced no spy on the rim would see him. The creek was close at hand, the taller pines standing above the upland timber. It was possible to circle away around eastward to reach town past the watchers on the plateau. However, his physical condition now warned Ira that he was over-doing it. Besides he could slip in easily enough this night at Lamson's and get some grub.

Planning that he turned left on approaching the creek, working along steadily towards the isolated place. It must have been ten o'clock, he figured, when he came to the woods' road. Orientating himself he moved away from proximity to the stream, advancing towards the south end of the house.

Well away he left his horse in the timber, stealing on afoot. As he quit cover of the trees the dog bounced off the porch. One low, short bark ended in a pleased whine as the dog reached him. Ira bent over to fondle the ears and speak in a whisper. He did not want the hardcases aroused in the cabin.

Standing upright, the dog at his heels, Ira went on to the shadowed lean-to porch. Only because he did not want to scare anyone there by awakening them suddenly was he cautious. Ira moved on tiptoes for the open kitchen door, and at the threshold came backward fast, startled. He stepped into the dog, the animal uttering a short whine. But the legs sticking out from under a quilt just inside the door did not move. Ira stole back to the edge of the frame, listening intently. The man had not awakened at all, and now he could hear the heavy breathing of other men in the kitchen sleeping on the floor.

Puzzled, he withdrew off the porch. Skulking along the end to the west corner he could see the corral between house and cabin. A considerable number of horses were in it. That indicated the few stables in the barn shed were filled, the overflow in the corral.

Feeling a little stunned by this development, Ira retreated behind the end of the house. A goodly number of men were

on the place, and they must have seized it. The 3 B's long-threatened grab, or just plain outlaws? Perhaps both, he decided in apprehension. Danger lurked here and he wondered with more concern what happened to the Lamsons when this bunch took over.

8

IRA GOT his horse, retreating deep into the timber where he unsaddled and hobbled out. Sleeping fitfully on the ground most of the night, he was awake and hiding on the edge of the axe-hewn clearing with the rising sun. Cheyenne appeared from the house a few minutes later, followed by two men who had been at Indian Flats. With them, straggling along was the small cowboy Ira discovered in the night riding in there.

From the cabin came others to help do the feeding. Old man Lamson did not show from the house at all. Smoke raised from the chimney and in due course some eight men went to the house for breakfast. Afterwards they returned to the outside, distributing themselves over the premises. Cheyenne and the lean man from Indian Flats sat down on the edge of the upper porch to smoke and talk.

Some sound of dishes and utensils rattled from the kitchen. It was an hour after that work ended before Ruth walked out of the kitchen door. She carried the two wooden water buckets, stepped down to the ground and set out for the creek. Sight of her relieved much of the tension in Ira. Stealing away from the tree behind which he watched, he ran into deeper timber and swung about for the creek.

Because of the round-about way he was forced to go, Ruth had filled the buckets and started away from the water's edge when he called guardedly to her from behind a large rock on the sloped bank. Immediately her face lighted up and she turned off the path to set the heavy buckets down.

'Ira Caldwell!' she breathed, darting to his side. A moment she was almost in tears before calming.

'What happened?' he asked, holding her hands.

'The 3 B outfit seized the place!' Her face fell into lines of worry.

'No one—hurt?'

'No.' Anger marked her pale cheeks next. 'It was easy for them. They really didn't have to harm father. It was those three men. They worked for the 3 B all the time!'

'The hardcases!'

'All they did was to inform father they were now in possession. Yesterday, that was, and the others rode in soon afterwards. Father is being kept a prisoner in the house. Afraid he'll manage to break and run for help, I suppose!'

'Well, I wasn't sure when I found them during the night,' he told her. 'Could be outlaws. I saw them this morning. I know three of them are from Indian Flats.'

'It really doesn't matter,' she returned bitterly. 'We'll lose. The ones here so long turned on father. That, after giving him soft words about how they'd help him stop thieves' inroads on our cattle. We have been losing young steers. Far too many. And it did seem that after they built the cabin and stayed here that the rustling stopped some.'

Her safety was most important to him, and he dwelled on it a few moments. It riled Ira that she was forced to cook and slave for the hardcase crew. In addition there was always the dire personal harm present.

'Leave the buckets right there,' he began hopefully. 'I'll take you out of here on my horse. You'll be safe in town. Or at the Jaltz farm, if you don't want to quit the basin altogether.'

She threw arms upwards around his neck, eyes tear-bright shiny as she kissed him impulsively in sudden happiness. Ira held her a few moments thinking that she would go. Since her absence was going to be missed and investigated the situation was urgent.

'We'd better be leaving,' he reminded.

At once she stepped away from him, shaking her head.

'I can't go. Please ride for help! Oh, please get someone to come chase them away before they can harm my father!'

'That I'll do,' he assured her huskily. 'But first I want to leave you in a safe place, Ruth.'

'I won't go,' she shook her head determinedly. 'It's father. Don't you see that they may try to harm him in the end? If I am here I'm sure that I can prevent them—somehow!'

That was her determined stand and he could not argue Ruth,

out of it. She feared most to leave her father alone, with them. Ruth believed that only her presence prevented them from killing Dave Lamson already.

'I am filling a wash tub this morning,' she said hurriedly. 'Wait here until I come back. You haven't had anything to eat, have you?'

'No, but I'd like most to get you away from here!'

Ruth gave him a tender smile, picked up the buckets and walked hurriedly along for the house. In case she might be suspicioned and followed he crossed the path to two close-set trees lower towards the stream. As the minutes passed he began to chafe, fearing she had been stopped. He could cover the path for a hundred yards, and when she reappeared on it his nerves leaped.

She came on rapidly with the buckets, almost running the last few yards. Glancing first at the rock she faced him, and he disclosed himself enough to be seen. Ruth hurried on to him, getting off the path before placing the buckets on the ground. From one she produced biscuits and fried meat. Starting to eat he asked if her long absence before caused them to suspect anything. Ruth shook her head.

'Cheyenne and the one they call Arch Quinn are now sitting at the table playing coon can with father.'

Sooner or later some of the gang would be scouting around. He would have to be going in a hurry.

'I sure don't like to leave you behind,' he declared.

'It is the only way to protect father. Don't you see that? Anyway, you are coming back with help?'

He nodded his head at which tears of gratefulness beaded her eyes.

'When, do you think?'

Calculating rapidly he reasoned that the earliest would be some time the following day. Even then on approach they would not rush in because of the possible harm to her and Lamson in a wild shooting fight. If he could counsel whatever help obtained, they would slip in and try to take the bunch by surprise.

'I can tell you this,' she announced. 'Cheyenne expects some of the brothers with a few more men.'

He was surprised.

'What can they be up to, planting so many men here?'

'I don't know. Maybe the Buzzards are just coming to talk things over. Or,' and her face whitened to chalk, 'argue with father about signing the place over to them with a deed.'

He nodded his head. That could be the answer.

'That paper won't be worth anything,' he sought to reassure her. 'We'll see to that.'

Since time was most important he left, but not before kissing her red lips once. Hurrying through the timber he resaddled the dun and took off up the creek. His thoughts were all black, for he believed the Buzzard brothers to be the rustlers behind the Indian Flats deal. He could see the probable reason for wanting Lamson's place.

It would become a thieves' hang-out, a fort for them. Its seizure removed one serious handicap to rustler operations. It took out an honest citizen who could later give evidence against them. Lamson was the only one near enough to Indian Flats to cause them injury. The more he cogitated on these faults the more certain Ira grew. It therefore followed that their real intention was to ultimately do away with the old man.

Reaching the crooked forks where the creek began, he followed one eastward. From it he negotiated the plateau rim in a low place. Maybe the watchers were still on the far rim. But if so they would be unable to detect him here. The plateau surface dipped eastward and stands of isolated timber were between him and the distant wagon road.

He rode steadily past noon, and around three o'clock entered Shoeton on the same road he had days before. It paralleled the railroad tracks and he followed through to the business part of town. Putting his horse in an adobe-walled wagon yard on a feed of grain he walked on around a corner into the main street.

Surveying the sidewalks before the saloons he stopped down by the post office. Nowhere appeared anyone resembling Paulsen or the cowboys he saw for a brief time only. As he walked along it was to scrutinise the brands on horses. None were familiar, and no 3 B's which were what he looked for.

Just beyond the post office he met a man coming out of a

store who wore a badge on his vest. The lettering said 'Town Marshal,' and as the officer's gaze bore on him Ira halted.

'Howdy,' he began tentatively. 'Happen to see anything of Steve Paulsen in town to-day?'

Larry Gates finished brief inspection of him and shook his head.

'He came back this way several days ago from chasing thieves. Haven't seen him since.'

'The Judy outfit been having rustler trouble?'

'Yeah, a hundred steers taken in one night. Don't believe I've seen you around before?'

'The name's Ira Caldwell,' the cowboy replied. What should he do now? Trying to make up his mind to seek help from the marshal, who likely had no authority outside of the town limits anyway, he asked about the theft as though interested greatly.

Gates started telling him the details in a slow drawl. He got part of the story related when his roving eyes came to focus on a wiry man who rode in leading a mule with open panniers on a pack saddle. Before the post office he dismounted to tie up.

'Say,' Gates broke off his narrative, 'there's Paulsen's ramrod now. Pinky Norman, or do you know him?'

'No, but thanks,' Ira replied quickly. He turned down the walk, meeting the red-faced foreman as he came away from a pannier with a sack to put mail in.

He glanced at Ira, through him it seemed, and without pausing entered the wooden post office building. Ira eased in after him, waiting until Judy's foreman sacked the mail at the window.

'You're Norman?' he began as the ramrod lifted around carrying the filled sack.

Norman's eyes roved over him anew and he nodded his head. Then he felt startled on remembering the stranger over in the basin.

'You wanted to see me?' he asked quickly.

'Steve Paulsen mostly. He in town?'

'At Judy. What can I do for you, the boss not being here?'

Other people entered the post office. Ira motioned with his head towards the open. Quietly they left, Ira standing beside

Norman while the foreman put the mail sack in a pannier, strapping on the cover.

'My name's Ira Caldwell,' the cowboy began.

Norman turned slowly, his eyes wide open with interest.

'We know about you,' he answered. 'Anything important? You could ride out to Judy with me.'

'The worst kind of news,' Ira told him. 'The 3 B has grabbed old Dave Lamson and his daughter. Keeping them prisoners on the ranch.'

Norman stared at him, then swore feelingly. He looked up and down the street, discovering no one he wanted. Gates was not in sight either.

'It would take a little time to get the sheriff over here,' he said dully. 'Maybe two-three days.'

'I'm afraid there's no waiting that long. How about some cowboys going in there to lift that rotten deal?'

Norman considered that, hesitating because he did not know what to do about it.

'Why, I reckon,' he allowed finally. 'Suppose you come along and tell it to Steve. We'll see what he thinks.'

Ira shook his head.

'After you people shot holes into me the Lamsons took me in. I'm going back there and see what I can do. The girl, she's among outlaws.'

'You say, the 3 B grabbed the place? Them's cowmen, not outlaws. I don't reckon them rambunctious Buzzard brothers will descend to murder, though I reckon they're gonna have to be reasoned with to turn the Lamsons loose.'

'Another thing,' he paused to frown, 'I dunno about how it would be for Judy cowboys to pile in there on the warpath. The Buzzards liable to holler range grabbers and make a fight of it.'

Ira regarded him with disillusioned eyes a moment, and remembered the brand on the horse and mule. He looked at the plain Cross P on the mule's right hip.

'That the same brand Judy uses on cattle?' he gestured at it.

'Why, yeah,' Norman was immediately puzzled.

'Then I betcha Steve Paulsen will come running. No argument about the Buzzard brothers. Lookit.'

With a boot toe Ira marked a Cross P in the loose dirt at their feet. When Norman lifted his eyes to him, questioninglly and back, the cowboy quickly converted the Cross **P (+P)** into **(3-B) (3-B)**.

The foreman gasped, 'Dad-gum! Sure can be done, but why and if so?'

Ira grinned thinly.

'I've been ranging around the basin. Secret place called Indian Flats. Got some big steers in there wearing a freshly burned 3 B like that. I hear Judy's lost some not long ago. The cattle drive-way is into the upper basin and east on the north side. *Around* the 3 B to Indian Flats.'

Norman gasped, 'Caldwell, do you realise what you're telling me?'

'I am, and I've been around this kind of business a long time.'

'After we got your letter, we figgered you to be an officer of some kind.'

Ira started, remembering the sudden change of the hardcases towards him.

'My gosh! could them Buzzards and the thieves working Indian Flats, now from Lamson's, have got the same idea?'

'Well, maybe. What happened?'

Ira told him quickly, adding, 'But man, help has got to get to the Lamsons!'

Norman continued puzzled and worried.

'Sure, that's right. But this other thing, you're *positive* them rats are changing Cross P into 3 B?'

'Norman,' levelly, 'tell me something. What would they be doing running a wide-marked fresh 3 B on three and four year old steers? Think they missed round-up that long, from being steered without a brand?' He laughed derisively.

Norman nodded his head sombrely, his lips setting firmly.

'You are an officer?'

'No, I came here bearing that letter from Lynn, where I met him and worked a while near Julesburg. Then your bunch ganged me before I could get out of the saddle to find a bit to eat. Never mind all that. It's the Lamsons I'm worrying about!'

'Yeah, sure. Uh, grab your horse and come with me to

Judy. Let the boss hear this and the Lamsons will get plenty of help!

'But when? How far is Judy from town?'

'Fifteen-twenty miles. Time we can gather, mount the boys and reach Lamson's place be some time o-morrow afternoon late, or night, I'd say.'

'Too cussed long to suit me,' Ira replied gloomily. 'I'm going back in there to-night.'

'Man, you can't do nothing alone!'

'No?' Ira rocked on his boot heels. 'I'm taking Lynn's word for it Judy is an honest outfit. If so Paulsen will come lickety-split. So back I go. Be around if the Lamsons need help sudden. Otherwise will wait until your outfit rides in. How's that sound?'

'Well,' Norman paused. 'I think you're reckless. The boss would have to *know* them rebranded steers belong to us. But,' hastily as Ira clouded in anger, 'I reckon we can surround and hold while that's being done.'

'Okay, I'm leaving it with you. Do the best you can, will you?'

'On my way, in a run for home,' Norman promised.

While unfastening his stock he asked again if Ira didn't think they could do more by him going to Judy. He got the same answer and turning out from the tie rail leading the pack mule, Norman kicked into a fast trot out of town.

9

WHEN THE ramrod was gone Ira turned up the street, entering the first place boasting a food counter. He ate because his next meal might be delayed. Also, it gave him an opportunity to cogitate over possible help from Judy. As he viewed it now there was bound to be too much delay. Nor was the prospect of obtaining help from Paulsen as good as he preferred. Judy's ramrod had been cautious in his answers. Probably from the fact that the cowman, a strong-minded individual, made all the ranch's decisions personally on the spot.

Cowboys were a clannish lot, quick to help another in need. Ira knew this, but being a stranger he could easily give out damaging information to the wrong parties by contacting them. Concluding this he thought of wandering cowboys who might have just drifted into town. But when he left the eating counter and moved up front in the dingy saloon, not one individual who appeared to be such was at the bar.

He wandered thoughtfully into two more places with the same result. The town possessed a sad lack of drifters. And for no wonder, either. Paulsen's proclivity for making short shrift of hardcases had given Shoeton a tough name. Drifting cowboys would be certain of passing it by. So Ira was out of luck with that idea, and felt resentful and bitter. Finding such cowboys he might have been able to induce a few to side him.

Abandoning search for them towards the tag end of the day he entered the Teton. A restless urge beset him to be riding for Rayado Basin, forced to depend on possible help from Judy. He ordered a drink, and downed it.

From the street men were coming and going, and as he set his glass back empty Ira turned out. Abruptly he halted, very nearly running into Deke and Ewel Buzzard as they tried to crowd in. Behind them stood two of their riders.

The Buzzard' brothers came to quick stops, surprised eyes

glinting on him. They were startled because they didn't think he escaped the basin. That clearly indicated the watchers on the rim were their men.

Ewel's face darkened and swearing he cried loudly, 'Here's the rat who bushwhacked one of our boys!'

Silence was already beginning around them because their hostility was plain. Now it took on the nature of shock, spreading fast in the saloon.

'That's what you say,' Ira retorted. 'Might be a matter of who shot first.'

'No matter of nothing!' Ewel stormed wrathfully. 'We was riding basin range and you shot one of my punchers from the brush. Without warning!'

'No ambush and he fired first,' Ira replied levelly.

Deke did not give way to his temper. Quietly he started slithering away from his brother. Pretty soon the two cowboys behind them would spread. When that happened some of the quartet would get Ira in a general fight. On the verge of surrounding Ira in a trap Ewel made his bad mistake. He knew the others were shifting positions and he thought they were already spread.

'It's about time we took action on such as you!' Ewel flared.

He sought to confuse Ira by lunging to the right while jerking at his gun holster. But Deke, the smarter of the two, was already drawing. He shot too fast from the hip, the bullet splintering into the bar behind Ira's legs. The cowboy moved with Ewel and a gun bucked in his hand. But Ewel had gone too far over. Right into the path of the bullet aimed at his brother. He was thrown part way around, losing his gun. The sudden break into fighting caught the cowboys not quite ready. They had not spread fully, and their guns remained in the holsters as Ira shifted slightly to cover the whole group.

Deke, paralysed with sudden fear, let his gun clang hard to the dirty bar-room floor. While he turned to aid his whining brother who clutched at his right shoulder where the bullet struck him Ira motioned with the muzzle of his gun. The cowboys promptly moved closer to Deke and Ewel.

A path cleared. Ira got away from the bar promptly. Twirling the sixgun once with finger through the trigger guard he

holstered it. The staring eyes of the 3 B men gave no intention of continuing the fight after the wounding of Ewel.

'I'm getting a little tired of being jumped on by you Buzzards and your men,' Ira announced clearly. 'Don't try it no more. Next time I'll drill you through the middle!'

Sheer bravado, but only Ira knew so. He might have done just that to Deke. Ewel simply happened to get in the way of the bullet. But all who saw could not know it was an accident.

In the silence Ira moseyed sideways to the door on guard against a sudden draw from the cowboys. It did not come and he slipped through the batwings into the street. The situation behooved him to leave town without delay. Losing himself off the main street he cut around to the adobe-walled wagon yard. It took a few minutes to saddle before he led the dun over the wind-swept centre of the yard to the gate in the wall. The operator stood there and Ira handed him a silver dollar in payment for feeding his horse.

'Just heard there's been a shooting,' the wagon-yard man said. 'Some cowboy plugged a Buzzard brother!' He was excited, and intended to go uptown to hear the news in detail.

Ira drawled, 'That so?' and turned to his horse.

Around the open side of the adobe wall slid Town Marshal Gates. He had recognised Ira's voice in time to come with a drawn gun. Ira relaxed slowly as he faced him. The officer had caught up with him mighty fast.

'You'll have to come along with me, Caldwell,' Gates said determinedly. 'The Buzzard brothers are making charges.'

'How can they when Deke shot first?' Ira wanted to know flatly. 'The witnesses can tell you so. Or am I guilty just because the wounded man is Ewel Buzzard?'

'That part can come out at the trial,' Gates told him firmly. 'If them witnesses say they drew and fired on you to start the fight, I reckon the jury won't be long turning you out to grass. But the way I hear it is that Ewel never shot at all.'

Submitting to arrest meant he could not return to the basin. He would be unable to aid Ruth Lamson. An unthinkable position for him at the moment.

He drawled, making a mock motion of handing bridle reins

to the wagon-yardman, 'Looks like you'll have to unsaddle and put my horse away for me.'

'I'll take your gun,' Gates spoke, at the same time thinking Ira was giving up. 'Just stand still.'

He closed in intending to reach for the cowboy's holster. It was then the bridle reins dropped from Ira's hand and his right arm flashed upward. The hand struck below the marshal's sixgun, throwing it high so fast Gate's got no chance to fire. It would have been useless anyway, and then Ira had his hand on the gun. A quick twist brought it free into his possession. Gates stood still, breathing hard, the wagon-yard man bug eyed in astonishment at the sudden reversal of the situation.

Ira turned Gates around and relieved the town marshal of his second gun.

'I'm not being taken out of the play which would help the Buzzard brothers,' he said tersely. 'You may be an honest officer for all I know but I'm taking no chance.'

'I'll toss your shooting irons near the corner of the wall on leaving,' he concluded.

Gates was still coming around slowly, his face showing pure wrath, while Ira went into the saddle in one fast movement.

'I'll get a posse and stay with you for ever until I get you!' Gates cried.

Ira nodded his head at that, wearing a fixed grin.

'If I could depend on you fetching an honest posse on my back trail, I'd tell you right where I'm going,' he told him almost casually. 'I'm not running far and I won't be hard to find.'

He rode through the wall, and aware that they changed positions to watch him, cut down it on the other side. Going into a gallop as he curved about the corner, Ira tossed the marshal's weapons to the ground.

There appeared to be considerable noise uptown as he took the side street east on a run. Just to confuse the marshal who would see him on it beyond gunshot range, he swung over into another around the near corner. But once the turn was made he lost no time quitting Shoeton for the lower range of the plateau on which the town stood.

Until intervening range hid a view of Shoeton he watched

backward in the dusk. But no band of riders came racing after him. Somehow he doubted there would be, unless 3 B men. Not enough of them were in town with Deke and Ewel to overhaul him.

Thereafter he left an open, easily followed trail directly for the rim above the beginnings of the creek. It was midnight when he reached there, finding a place to slide off the plateau into the deeper timber.

Nearly two hours later he sat his saddle below the south end of the house, surveying the premises. It seemed as lifeless as expected, but there was still a large number of horses in the corral. Not for a minute did he doubt but what the hardcases were still in illegal control.

Riding slowly, he circled the place west around behind the barn. Dismounting he ground tied and entered the barn through the stalls. From there to the saddle shed he skulked, giving more attention to the premises. There was no guard anywhere, which indicated the 3 B outfit considered themselves perfectly safe against sudden attack.

'Reckon we'd better put an end to that,' he observed to himself.

Retreating to the back of the barn Ira went all the way around the big pole corral, sneaking in behind the cabin. The 3 B needed to be plunged into worry and as much fear as he could deal, he thought. Too soft a situation could well bring immediate harm to the Lamsons because they were convinced they could get away with whatever they wanted to do.

No plan occurred to Ira until he gained around to the open door of the cabin. Prolonged snores echoed out of it. When he went over the threshold it was to find only four men sleeping inside, on as many bunks built against the side wall.

In absolute carelessness under the circumstances, the hardcases had hung their guns and belts over bunk corners. Moving on his toes Ira gathered them, depositing belts and weapons in a far corner, covering them with a blanket lying on the floor.

All this time not one of the hardcases roused out. They slept soundly, Tiny, Pete, the sallow kid, and the black-complexioned cowboy from Indian Flats. In the gloom of the cabin, starlight reflected dimly from the outside, he could see them all.

Tiny and Pete occupied the far bunks so he went to the first two, jerking each man by the feet. The thin cowboy came up-right fast, more alert than the other one. But he likewise stirred, both rubbing sleep from their eyes without realising yet what happened. Until Ira moved close with a gun in his hand.

'Don't make no racket, and stand off them bunks,' he ordered in a low voice.

The kid stood up, fully awake and staring around. The other slid over, where his gun should be hanging. It wasn't there, and he gave in promptly.

'Walk past the end of them other two bunks,' Ira continued in the same flat manner. 'Just be quiet—or you get it sudden-like!'

That pair were bewildered and unable to think fast enough. They obeyed and easing forward Ira raised a right boot to kick Tiny's feet. The big man came from his blankets swearing, reaching instinctively for his gun.

'Come on out, quiet,' Ira hissed at him.

Pete came awake grumblingly. 'What's the racket about? It ain't daylight yet.'

'Get offa that bunk, Pete,' Ira ordered. 'Don't be reaching for a gun. It ain't there!'

Tiny lumbered onto his feet still groggy from sleep, else he would not have made a stab at Ira. He was too close and as his long arms swung the cowboy guessed what he intended. Moving half a step he slashed the gun barrel against the side of his head. The big man did not fall. Uttering a groan his arms dropped. Slanting sideways to evade a second possible blow he crashed into Pete. They fell to the floor, entangled while Ira stood over them, warning for silence.

Pete came upward first, walking on bare feet to the standing prisoners. Tiny arose more slowly, glowering in the gloom, still not understanding the true situation. He was dangerous, like a wounded bear and Ira watched him more than the others.

'So it's you, hunh?' came hollowly from Pete.

Tiny jerked his head around at him and automatically turned to join the others. All four were lined up attired only in their underwear.

'I'm taking you over to the saddle shed,' Ira informed them.

in a chilly voice. 'Any monkey shines on the way and you'll be very, very sorry!'

'You won't get away with this!' Tiny sneered.

'Shut up!'

Moving them one at a time he lined the hardcases up facing the door, solidly packed against each other. Getting them through the cabin door without attempt at escape was tricky business. Yet Ira accomplished it by marching them in lock-step. Only the thin cowboy in front got a chance to make a break. He started one, gaining a couple of feet when Ira emerged from the door immediately behind the prisoners. Nor did he have to say a word, the kid seeing that he was caught dropped back ruefully to the head of the line.

In short order Ira marched them to the saddle shed. Not chancing them inside the darkness there, he stopped the bunch at the wide entrance, slipping past Pete into it alone. Where they couldn't see him he holstered his gun, cutting strings from their saddles.

The brown dog had not been around and he had almost forgotten the animal. Which was his error. For the dog not catching Ira's familiar scent was aroused only by stealthy men at the saddle shed. It came off the porch end with a bound into the moonlight, setting up a furious barking. Ira let go the saddle strings, closed his pocket knife and put it away. Even as he did so he was on his way back to the door of the shed. Yet he knew already that his play was coppered. The dog's loud, angry barking awakened everybody in the log house.

He had no choice, and hoping only to knock them down in time to drag from sight, Ira slammed his gun barrel against Pete's head. The hardcase toppled over and Ira knocked the black-haired man from Indian Flats cold next.

But that was all. Half-clothed hardcases, holding weapons, ran from the front rooms of the house onto the porch. Also the thin kid and Tiny were on the run barefooted for the west corral. They sped squalling their lungs out.

The men on the porch spread apart, some running off to the nearest big trees.

From safety beside the corral Tiny yelled, 'It's Caldwell, Cheyenne! Tried to capture us!'

They knew he must be in the saddle shed, and suddenly the night broke apart with the crash of gunfire. Bullets whined through the opening, back from which Ira ducked. Likewise, heavier chunks of lead came right through the pine board front wall.

The infernal racket increased, and in another few moments Cheyenne would call a halt. He would then despatch men around the barn. Knowing it useless to try fighting them off, Ira slapped his sixgun into leather.

Already the shooting slacked off and Cheyenne's voice raised giving orders. Ira went out of the back of the shed fast, running on through the stable part to his horse in the rear.

No gun roared at all as he mounted and turned into the timber beyond. He rode on, and after a hundred yards put the dun into a gallop. Bitterness went with him, for if he had been able to secure the four hardcases perhaps he could have captured those in the house as well. Except that there had been more than four rushing out of it. Ira reflected on that, deciding that Cheyenne's bunch received reinforcements during his absence.

10

FAR DOWNSTREAM Ira entered the water where it broadened shallow over hard rock. He rode until considering his get-away concealed. Then he came out on the east side, streaking in a hard run for more than a mile through the waving grass. By that time he should have thrown all possible trackers off.

Still hurrying, he circled southward and into the timber behind the place where Ruth always came for water. The path ended on the other side, so Ira hobbled his horse, leaving the saddle on with cinches loosened and bridle over the horn.

Pulling rifle from the scabbard he essayed on to the edge of the creek, surveying the area. Long since quiet had been restored to the place. Nor were any lights in evidence. Overhead clouds were beginning to cover the stars, warning that dawn was not far off.

The creek was not crossable, where he stood, so he moved downstream. Somewhere well past the barn he found shallow places and boulders sticking above the water. Removing his boots Ira waded out, and climbed from one boulder to another. On the west side of the creek he continued barefooted. The hardcases would be unable to track him. With the water rung out of his socks he stole on in the timber until even with the rear wall of the barn. There he put his boots on.

Since the barn with its deep black shadows was a dangerous place for skulkers he avoided it. Passing west he came in behind the outermost corral corner. From there he reconnoitred. Nowhere did he find evidence of a guard. But that one had been set up immediately after he fled Ira felt certain of.

Time drifted dangerously close to the break of day. No sign of the guard, but the man could be before the barn or on the house porch. Ira could not see into the full extent of those places. Withdrawing, he circled to the east side of the premises, crouching behind a large boled tree. He could see down along

the front of the barn, past the saddle shed to the corral fence. In the lifting gray of morning no guard howled there.

He was on the porch, the dog disclosing his presence. From time to time the man assigned the job walked to the lower end to reconnoitre the timber. Next he moved towards the extreme north end. The dog on the ground before the porch followed to each end when he changed positions.

The roof dropped an oblong of shadow in which the guard lurked. Besides, Ira disliked firing on him when a miss meant the bullet might crash in through door or window. Nevertheless, he assumed station from which he could fire as the yellow light began to stretch across the horizon.

The sun was coming up when the guard stepped off the porch, a rifle cradled in his left arm. He glanced around, still walking. Since he made for the cabin, probably he intended to awaken the men there. He was a 3 B cowboy whom Ira had not seen before. Also, he did not want to fire a death-dealing bullet. A badly wounded man was just as much out of the fight as a dead one. For that reason he lowered his aim before squeezing the trigger of the rifle.

A split second before the crash on the air the guard wheeled about. He lost his rifle and fell, clutching at the burning pain in his right thigh. His loud wails of anguish were not needed to bring the others out.

Levering a new cartridge into the firing chamber Ira was ready when a man filled the cabin door. The action was so swift he did not have time to identify that worthy. The rifle roared and the man with a sharp yell disappeared from the opening.

From the kitchen door came two men, charging out while buckling gun belts. Ira was ready, sending a bullet across the porch before them. It was close and succeeded in driving them back a lot faster than they rushed to the outside.

The three shots had him located for them. Before they started shooting at the tree from the house and cabin, Ira was moving on. Behind more trees he turned right, slipping over beside the lean-to barn shed. From that spot he could not reconnoitre the premises as gunfire died away. The hardcases reasoned he fled by that time.

Still, the hit and run business would unnerve them. No guard,

day or night, could know that he would not be fired on from cover. It would make them wary and cautious about exposing themselves. Ira slipped to the outer corner, which was part of the saddle shed.

Nobody exposed himself at the cabin yet. Over on the porch, however, Cheyenne emerged from the kitchen door followed by two men. They halted barely over the threshold. In a bunch they moved on very cautiously as if testing to see if the rifleman was still around.

Ira had to chuckle mirthlessly to himself. Their boldness would bring others into the open, and he wanted them to worry about being cooped up longer. He wanted Cheyenne, but as the three moved farther out he aimed at the centre man.

Again he saw a cowboy fall wounded before the roar of the rifle awoke echoes in the timber. Cheyenne darted like a snake for the kitchen door, the other standing man very nearly running over him to get there.

The wounded one crawled on the porch floor. Short of the door he stretched his arms overhead into it and was dragged quickly inside the kitchen. The next move would be a sudden rush outside in force and Ira was through once more.

Turning, he went into a trot along the shed wall to the north. Beyond the cleared space into the timber he found a big boulder. Removing his boots he stepped leary of clumps of grass until deeper in the forest. With boots on again he worked slowly around to the west side, always under cover and listening for the possibility of riders starting to shake the forest for him.

Nothing like that happened. Crossing the wagon road he walked backwards, erasing his tracks with a rolled bunch of long grass. That accomplished he moved on quickly for a spot below the south end of the house. On approach to where he could survey the place noise of men and horses reached him on the wind.

It looked like they were in a hurry to saddle at the shed, their bridled horses before it. Between the animals and the shed door loomed a confusion of working men. Cheyenne was certainly one of them, and Pete. But it was the lumbering Tiny who showed clear on the right.

Ira watching them with one eye, levered the cartridges out

of the rifle magazine. Only four bullets left. Slowly he replaced them, putting one into the firing chamber. Tiny tightened cinches at that moment, standing back to him as his horse swung sideways. This time Ira took a little better aim, higher.

His failure then was an accident, for he did miss the big man as Tiny reached for bridle reins. So close was the bullet however, that it bored into the head of the 3 B horse. In falling dead the animal crashed into the wall of the shed, breaking out two boards when the saddle punched through.

The shot spooked the other horses away, and drove the hardcases inside the shed. They could gain advantageous spots by going on into the barn. That would consume time and now they were not going to be chasing after him, or exposing themselves so recklessly in the open after this.

Backing out of cover, Ira walked away to the southwest. Finding more rocks he again repeated the trick of removing his boots. Cutting back in the opposite direction, walking some distance on flat rocks, he set out for the upper creek. Since he was through throwing bushwhack lead for some hours he needed to conceal his tracks into hiding. During the morning, especially later in the day, riders would filter through the timber everywhere seeking him. Frustrated, they would either conclude that he finally left the vicinity, or resort to seeking ground sign from the spots he fired from.

Ira continued walking barefooted, all the way on to the creek until locating a clump of thick brush suiting his purpose. Crawling into it he lay down and pulled on his boots. His feet by this time were a little bruised, yet he believed the ruse would deceive the hardcases. The presence of a bushwhacker they couldn't trace should drive them into worse fear of death-dealing bullets. This was the only way to impress such hardened men of danger.

Lying flat, head resting on folded arms Ira cat-napped for three hours. The sound of riders in the woods reached him from a distant point. Nor did noise of them increase. It went away over the woods' road towards the creek, and vanished northward. A mere scouting party. He returned to resting.

Nor did any more come within hearing distance either. He

continued to repose in the heat, past midday and on without untoward event. Finally he sat up, retrieved the rifle for the possibility of long shots and worked to the open. A spell of reconnoitring produced nothing whatever. In a way he was a little disappointed with the 3 B men. They should have made a more determined search for him. As their resourcefulness fell in his estimation, he made his way slowly downstream for the water path.

Surveying the position of the sun he wondered why Judy's cowboys had not come, if they were going to. But maybe it was too soon and he was impatient.

He crossed the worn path on rocks in the edge of the stream where the water was deipped up. Unable to cover any of the path from there, speculating whether or not they still left the water-toting job to Ruth, he verged out. The large hunk of granite rock where he met her before afforded a better view covering the source of danger. Ira made for it and as he passed a clump of manzanita growing against the base of the rock, stopped quickly. Neatly set down, visible only from a standing position over it, was a white shoe box.

Looking around quickly, checking the short open part of the path, he reached and picked it up. It was filled with fried beefsteak, bread, and a piece of chocolate cake.

Ruth sneaked him some food out of the house, hoping he would return to the rock some time during the day. Or maybe she had expected him to meet her here and been disappointed. Thankfully Ira sank to the grass and proceeded to eat every bite of food in the box. He felt stuffed afterwards and knowing he must conceal the shoe box, picked it up again.

Flattened, the box made a small object. As he started to roll it even smaller he found the penciled message on the gray bottom. Ruth had written, 'Please do not take such chances as this morning. If help is not close already your shooting a few of them isn't going to do any good anyway.'

A note of desperation in the message? He frowned uneasily, for it was indeed there. What could have happened at the house to make the Lamsons' situation worse than it already was?

He buried the rolled shoe-box paper under the manzanita, and looked at the sun. What the dickens could be keeping the

Judy outfit from riding in? Ira felt glum and as bitterness possessed him, guessed that Paulsen decided against bringing help. Many torturing doubts assailed him, to account for their failure to come. Surely they had had plenty of time to get here over the long distance.

Dulling himself to angered feeling for Paulsen he moved wider out to a tree. Time drifted and he hoped towards night Ruth might come for water. Yet no one did, and the day ended in a red-banded glow on the western horizon. Only then did he give up hope of meeting Ruth clandestinely.

His horse had been hobbled long and he needed to see that he still possessed a means of flight if it came to that. He headed downstream barefooted to take evidence away from the water path, hoping by no means would the hardcases catch on to the fact Ruth aided him. At a safe distance he replaced the boots on sore feet. In the new night he crossed the creek at the place used before, working around to his horse. The animal had strayed off into another glade.

Locating the dun he moved upstream a quarter mile to what he thought a better place. Now he removed riding gear entirely, and the hobbles. The lariat noose slipped over the dun's head, he led the horse to water. On returning he picketed instead of hobbling. That would confine the horse to one small spot, prevent wandering over to the creek to be seen.

Waiting until the starlight brightened and the moon came up, Ira walked up the creek. It took some time this way to find a way over, and once more his sore feet took the brunt of slow walking for the premises. When he could safely wear his boots, he skulked beyond the woods' road and came into position a little east of and at the lower porch end. From there he could barely see the cabin clear of the house, but all of the barn front and the house as well. Light glowed from the kitchen door and dully from the end window. Occasionally a high-raised voice echoed on the cooling night air.

The hardcases apparently dawdled over a late supper. Eventually two men came out on the porch. The cautious manner in which they did brought a silent laugh to Ira. He had thoroughly convinced them of his deadliness. The pair hugged the front house wall in the deep shadows until forced to enter the moon-

light when they stepped down from the porch. As he already surmised they were Pete and Tiny.

Once in the open they spread apart and lost no time getting on to the cabin. When they entered this time the door was closed. Ira did not fire on them when he had a good open shot. Now he wanted most to ascertain the well-being of Ruth and her father. That accomplished he would use the last three rifle cartridges on the 3 B.

Not so much noise escaped the kitchen now. Indeed, so quiet did the place become he began to suspect that not all the bunch remained that was present during the morning. It was then he discovered the outside guard.

Part of the shadow against the end house logs moved. Startled, Ira watched carefully until making out the form of a man. He packed a rifle, coming all the way along the wall to a spot near the window.

The guard faced outward at the dark forest, and one step brought him into part of the moonlight. Dressed like a cowboy, he was someone Ira never saw before. Next the guard very carelessly walked over to the lighted window. A few moments he stood looking into the kitchen before meandering away over the route he appeared by. The far corner took him out of view to the back of the house, and to wherever the balance of his beat lay.

The lighted window gave Ira an idea. Since the guard was gone he would risk it. Stealing through the trees he gained a place opposite the block of light. One look and his hope died. A white sheet hung on a frame, some distance from the window. It shielded the main part of the kitchen. Yet not enough to prevent rays of the hanging lamp from shining through the window panes. Only by getting as close as the guard had been would he be able to see around one side of it. Probably not much even then.

Disappointed, Ira stole on west to where he could view the rear house wall against approach of the guard. While studying the log wall Ira became glad that he took no pot shots at any of them yet. For now he discovered a square window into the corner room. It was the one Ruth occupied. It opened and closed by a thin sliding panel of wood. No glass in it at all.

His mental faculties sharpened, and Ira conceived a plan. Let them get to sleep, scrag the guard off his rounds here and maybe he could get Ruth through the window. If he aroused her quietly perhaps they could collect Lamson as well. Once he got them out of the house, and this time surely Ruth would go, they could escape into the forest.

SIMP BUZZARD rode in at Lamson's place near sundown with four men. It was in the early morning hours following that the bushwhack fighting broke out. After the morning sortie when it developed that Caldwell was not around longer, he sent riders searching the timber. The result did not surprise him.

'He tried to murder as many as he could before morning,' Simp told Cheyenne in a satisfied voice. 'He missed, so now he's gone. Which puzzles me.'

'He never was no officer sent in to work undercover for Paulsen?' Cheyenne hazarded.

After thinking that over Simp shrugged his shoulders. They stood before the barn where all the rest who were able to walk gathered with them.

'If he is,' Simp said finally, in a grating voice of doubt, 'he's sloped for help. Or else we're in for some other kind of argument.'

They all watched him, waiting for further explanation. It did not come. Simp turned to Quinn.

'Them freshly branded steers still running in one bunch?' he asked.

'Shore, boss!'

'Take enough hands and go get them out of there. Plumb over into the badlands. If there ain't enough 3 B critters to account for all the tracks around, shove some more that way. Whatever, get them fresh brands gone so far they can't be found. And, Arch, do it in a hurry.'

'Shore thing, boss!' Quinn exclaimed, leading the way to re-saddle horses.

Simp did not dispense with everybody at Lamson's. He kept two of his main crew cowboys along with Cheyenne, Pete and Tiny.

'If I'm gonna have fighting around here I want some good

men with me,' he alleged privately to Cheyenne. 'So you three especially, hang around.'

Simp had a feeling that the situation was far from well. For that reason he got the two wounded mounted and started on their slow ride for the distant ranch. In case of a sudden withdrawal, or a sortie in force they would hamper speedy movement.

He ordered a guard posted and after the noon meal sat in the kitchen playing Seven-up with Cheyenne. The afternoon wore on when Deke rode in accompanied by two men. These he left at the barn, walking over to the house alone.

Having heard their clattering arrival, Simp stacked the cards and sat chewing tobacco when Deke entered. His face was flushed red and he seethed with anger that began in him the day before.

'We met the two wounded boys going home at a slow walk, Simp,' he began. 'Heard of the trouble here from them. How come you figger the lone bushwhacker to be Caldwell?'

'He was recognised,' Simp replied promptly. 'The rat tried to take the four fellers in the bunkhouse prisoner. Knocked two men cold, escaped and wounded two of my best boys. No doubt it being that feller.'

'Now, that's queer,' Deke sounded puzzled. 'For no doubt of him being in town at sundown yesterday. He shot Ewel in the Teton!'

Simp exclaimed, 'What?' and turned around on his chair.

Deke gave an account of the fight in town. Simp thought rapidly, nodding his head when he finished.

'By fast riding he could of made it to here by the time he opened up,' he decided.

'You fetch them papers?' he asked next.

That was Deke and Ewel's errand in town. Deke had gotten them, all made out, before visiting the Teton where Ewel was plugged. He removed the documents from a pocket. Simp gave them a careful going over, and was satisfied. He told Cheyenne to get Lamson and Ruth. Both spent most of the time in the rear rooms of the house. Ruth always disappeared there as soon as she cooked a meal.

Cheyenne returned to the kitchen first. Shortly the Lamsons

appeared, standing just inside the door to the north room. Ruth returned to wearing the old overalls and a man's shirt. Both considered the Buzzard brothers obliquely, Ruth with considerable apprehension.

'Here's some papers you can sign, Lamson,' Simp began in, an ordinary conversational tone of voice. 'A deed to the land and a bill of sale on the furnishings around here.'

The old man's face quivered a little.

'What in tarnation you fellers think you're pulling in a civilised country?' he demanded querulously. 'I'm not signing nothing by force!'

'Better change your mind, because we're taking over anyhow,' Simp returned levelly. 'You're only bringing trouble on yourself and your daughter.'

'Folks will hang you for molesting her!' Lamson charged.

'Perhaps,' Simp continued to talk smoothly. 'That we'll find out later. You ready to sign them papers, hook up your wagon and go away?'

'You crazy?' Lamson demanded.

'All right, you're looking at serious trouble, old man. The deal is this. We pay you off. Don't take it over for free. You and your daughter can leave in the wagon. I'll give you a thousand dollars for the place. Count yourself lucky. We don't *have* to pay you anything.'

Deke started, eyeing his brother sharply.

'How come we hand over money like that?' he demanded.

Lamson said bitterly, 'A thousand dollars won't begin to pay for my cattle!'

'What cattle?' Simp sneered at him. 'All stolen, and we'll vent the brands mighty quick now. That's the deal. It won't be offered you a second time.'

Ruth swallowed painfully, her face very white as she considered her aged father.

'Take their proposition,' she began in a pleading voice. 'It will be something and we can get away from this rotten basin and the terrible people in it!'

'Ruth, you don't mean it?' Lamson asked quickly. 'Let these cut-throats get away with swindling us out of everything we got in the world?'

'Father, please?'

Lamson faced the watching group determinedly.

'That all you wanted?'

'We'll need your government patent on the land,' Simp told him. 'Get it and some ink to scratch your name on these papers.'

'Never in this world!' Lamson flared.

Turning on his heels he hastened to the back of the house. Ruth sprang after him, and before their voices died she could be heard arguing with him.

Deke surveyed his brother bleakly.

'Looks like we got nothing from the old coot. Now what?'

Simp picked up the greasy deck of cards, shuffled and started laying out a game of solitaire.

'It's plumb in the bag,' he glanced upward briefly, wearing a gloating grin. 'The girl will convince him, to get out of here with her old man still alive. Let them cool and by to-morrow morning Lamson will be plumb eager to sign.'

'But supposing he don't?'

Simp played two cards, then glanced around to see if anyone else had joined Deke and Cheyenne. Only then did he speak and he laughed without mirth doing so.

'Lamson disappears and the government takes over his property. It can then be bought for less than I offered him. We'll see to it.'

'Now that sounds like smart dealing,' Deke declared. 'Why not do it that way?'

'Why, it would be the easiest way out,' Simp replied. 'Lamson paid, and folks can't be saying we stole the whole works!'

Deke snickered admiringly at his brother's sagacity. Calmly Simp returned to playing cards. Yet he was far from confident of the ultimate triumph that he let on to them. The Caldwell business bothered him greatly. Since the cowboy had definitely gone to town, how come if he was an officer that he didn't bring back help? A moment Simp felt his nerves jangle, that maybe he had. Then knew better for he did the shooting alone. The sign of no others lay in the surrounding timber. It looked like Caldwell did not try, or else failed to obtain help. His action since was that of a desperate, reckless cowboy carrying on a

one-man fight against odds. As another idea occurred to him Simp raised his head at Cheyenne.

'This Caldwell, he make up to Ruth Lamson while here?'

Cheyenne started, realising Simp was onto something. Yet on sombre reflection, Cheyenne could not answer the question affirmatively. All he could report was that the cowboy had been polite and a gentleman towards Ruth. Adding that the first night he appeared, wounded, she insisted he stay in the house. Her excuse was that she did not want her best comforters packed to the cabin.

Simp asked, 'Could it be possible this Caldwell was known to them before, that he did not come here a stranger as they let on?'

To that Cheyenne shook his head. He did not believe so because Ruth and the old man certainly let nothing escape otherwise than that they never saw the cowboy before.

Simp shoved his cards together. He said, 'Boys, I've figured it out. This Caldwell is a drifting cowboy. Found help here, got sweet on the girl and is trying a lone wolf job of helping them.'

Simp couldn't know that he hit the truth exactly. Right away Deke confused him by shaking his head and opinioning otherwise.

'How come he snooped so much in the basin? Why'd he ride to town yesterday if not to see if he couldn't get help?'

Because he had points there and Caldwell might actually have done just that, Simp pondered deeply. Through thought process he came upon a reasonable answer to account for the snooping. At least to himself.

'I got an idea the girl wasn't fooled like Lamson,' he offered. 'She knowed Cheyenne and his two partners didn't throw in just to help an old man. She reasoned they was up to something, but not what. When she told Caldwell he tried to find out what was going on.'

'Why his sudden ride to town?' came from Deke.

'Maybe he did go for help. Likely hunting drifters like himself who would throw in with him on a shoe string. Only help he could possibly get would be from Judy, and they'd have been in on us before now.'

'Paulsen wouldn't dare invade the basin!' Deke scoffed loudly. 'He knows it would bring on war between us. Judy ain't in no position to carry on one!'

'No?' Simp's eyes dilated on him.

'Hold on,' Cheyenne spoke up. 'You're forgetting that Caldwell arrived here wounded. Claimed he was shot at and chased from town by men he described to us. One was certainly Paulsen. What is more, after we told him he claimed he'd like to have it out with him.'

'Likely a front to make himself solid here,' Simp speculated. 'If he was working for Paulsen he'd naturally try to appear different.'

'He was shot up all right, Simp,' Cheyenne insisted. 'No question about it.'

'That was the day Paulsen had most of his crew in town,' Deke reminded them. 'He chased out all drifters and suspicious characters. It's true he shot Caldwell. Folks in town said so.'

Simp shrugged his shoulders.

'All right, but there's some simple explanation for him just the same.'

'He's tough people, at least,' Cheyenne commented.

'What proof is there he's an undercover officer anyhow?' Deke finally questioned that, which meant Stover's story.

'Buttons overheard Pinky Norman and Paulsen discussing him at the bar after they'd read a letter just received,' he answered in a thoughtful vein. 'Hmm, Buttons took off on this other job. Wished we had him back here for a going over. But his story sounded like the truth at the time.'

'Him!' Deke scoffed. 'Chances are he imagined the whole thing.'

'No,' Simp shook his head. 'I know men better'n that. Buttons told exactly what he saw and heard at the time.'

'I'll have to buy that too,' Cheyenne put in. 'He told it here again. His tale hung together.'

'Then what?' Deke muttered darkly.

'Well, nothing much,' Simp alleged. 'Let whatever's in the making pop. I've taken precautions. No evidence around handy. Let anybody come storming in here. Okay with me. Come

breakfast to-morrow we'll have old Lamson's name on them papers and they'll be headed elsewhere. No harm can come to us over the deal.'

His decision settled further controversy about the matter. Cheyenne wandered away, and Deke entered the north room to sleep a while. Simp played solitaire monotonously until Ruth appeared to get supper.

Some of the others stirred out, over to the barn to do the chores. Simp stood on the porch a while, until the dusk fell. It was later before the bunch gathered in the kitchen to eat. As usual Ruth retired until most of them were gone from the house. Lamson came out of the back to eat with her. She remained afterwards long enough to wash the dishes alone. When the old man returned to his room Simp, Deke and Cheyenne sat at the table playing a nickel limit game of poker.

It was Simp not liking the uncovered window at his back who fashioned the cover for it from Ruth's quilting frames and a bed sheet. Thereafter the card game continued, until around nine o'clock when a rider galloped in at the place.

The game slowed, and stopped altogether when the outside guard appeared with Kinny. The two came into the light, and halted facing Simp who chewed at his tobacco.

'The whole Judy outfit is in the basin!' Kinny cried.

Cheyenne and Deke were excited and fearful at once. Only Simp remained as calm as before.

'Headed this way, I reckon?' he wanted to know.

Kinny shook his head.

'They're camped this side of Indian Flats. Hard to say what they're up to.'

'Them freshly branded steers?' Simp let his eyes run over him.

They were out of harm's way, Kinny replied. No evidence of Judy's men, or any other riders around when they reached the vicinity of Indian Flats that morning. They obeyed orders about moving the steers. Along in the afternoon on the drive Quinn cut Kinny back to the Flats for extra grub, realising from slow progress they would have to stay overnight in the badlands northwest of the basin. Kinny set out for the cabins there and luckily, he swore, spotted riders before getting into the open. For a time thereafter he loitered in hiding, watching

them. Judy's cowboys certainly went all through that part of the basin.

Kinny then started back to the men with the steers in a hurry, expecting them to be tracked. He reasoned warning should be given them first. That accomplished he turned around for Lamson's place. Then through the dark of night he spotted the gleam of a cooking fire. To be certain of their identity, he rode close enough to the camp to recognise Paulsen and his cowboys.

'Their camp is part way between here and Indian Flats?' Simp questioned.

'About half-way.'

Simp nodded his head in confirmation of a sudden theory.

'Which means they'll be in here some time to-night. Before dawn at least.'

Deke stalked to his feet, going over to stand anxiously watching his brainy brother.

Simp said to Kinny, 'You're certain they won't be able to pick up the right cow tracks and follow to the badlands?'

'I know so. We worked them steers west gradually, Simp. Didn't bunch until about three miles into the open basin. All day long them regular critters been grazing over the drive-out tracks. Who's going to be able to follow any certain ones now?'

Simp inclined his head, satisfied. He did not move from the chair.

'All right, get the boys out and saddled up. Somebody put my kak on my horse. We'll move around Judy to Indian Flats. Let Paulsen come in here, as I reckon he's aiming.'

Kinny and the guard left the kitchen ahead of Cheyenne and Deke. Simp arose when they were gone, walking into the north room. The door into the other rooms was closed. He opened it, shoving the door wide.

'Hey, you Lamsons come out here!' he yelled loudly.

Returning to the lighted kitchen Simp did not sit down. Presently old man Lamson, looking angry and sleepy appeared, pulling his galluses on. Ruth came in behind him, never having gone to bed. She was red eyed from weeping. Simp snorted in disgust.

'You ready to sign these papers and take your thousand dollar gift?' he said to Lamson.

'Consarn ye!' cried the old man. 'You danged tooting I'm not.'

'Father,' Ruth began and as his suddenly fiery gaze turned on her she choked to a stop.

Lamson stared belligerently back at Simp, who laughed once. He told him then there would be no further foolishness. Lamson would sign and move in the morning or he could take the consequences.

'Dern you varmints!' Lamson shrilled. 'Some day you'll get your just deserts!'

'What you'll get is a bullet in the head,' Simp threw at him, losing patience when unable to persuade Lamson to his bidding. 'All right, we're leaving. But don't get any ideas you're safe. One of these days soon there'll be no owners of this place. Some murdering scoundrel will kill you from the brush. Plenty of trees around here to hide behind. So when the government sells this place at public auction we'll buy it for a hundred bucks or so. Up to then we'll have the use of it free anyhow. I like this way better, and it saves me a thousand dollars!'

The dire threat was plain to the Lamsons. He waited, expecting an outbreak from the girl, and Lamson's immediate signature. Neither occurred. Ruth remained standing as though frozen. Lamson shook with a new spasm of indignation.

'Clear out, you varmints!' he hurled at Simp. 'You been getting free board and waiting on long enough!'

Walking as far as the door Simp paused, regarding Ruth a moment.

'You'd better talk some sense into your old man,' he warned.

'It's no use,' she answered in a choked voice. 'I've still got to admire father's stand for right.'

'Slow walking and lonesome singing,' Simp murmured mockingly, laughed and stepped through the door.

He walked through the starlight to the saddled horses before the barn, where the bunch talked low voiced. Simp's horse was saddled and he picked up bridle reins.

'Hey,' Deke stalked over, 'we got a good idea. Why not set the damned place a-fire before we leave? We'd burn it down anyhow.'

Simp turned slowly on his feet, gazing around at the closely

built solid little place. Wearing a thin grin he shook his head. He had changed his mind, he said.

'This is a right purty spot on the cree*', he declared. 'We could even divide up the outfit and have two main ranches. Yeah, that would be best. Run one here, the other in the west end. Riders between can control the whole basin.'

Deke swore once, hardly considering it as his brother did.

'Except for Sophie Jaltz we'd control it all. She's stuck there, and one deeded place in here encourages some other nester to squat.'

'Well, now, why don't you or Ewel marry that good-looking widder woman?' Simp chuckled at him. 'Be an easy way for us to get rid of her!'

'Aw, hell!' Deke exploded.

Laughing at him loudly, Simp stretched upward heavily into his saddle. The others mounted promptly, falling in behind him to take the wagon road out. Even if they were going to Indian Flats a feint towards the distant 3 B ranch must be made to confuse any possible tracking of them later.

12

WHILE JUDY's cowboys lay rolled in blankets scattered around in the brush, Paulsen walked restlessly back and forth where the firebed died. Doubt beset him. Their luck had been bad all day. Each of several moves a complete fizzle. The cowman argued with himself about riding on to Lamson's place. When he did the two outfits would mix with smoking guns. The Buzzard brothers would allege an attack on them in force. Thereon the sometimes threatened range war was on. Judy had no business trying to move into Rayado Basin. It was a momentous decision he must make. Release the Lamsons, but then he did not think the Buzzard brothers dared descend to murdering a helpless old man and his daughter. On the other hand he wasn't certain of it either.

It all boiled down to one single fact. Had Paulsen found one misbranded cow brute during the day all his hesitation and doubts would have vanished into a purposeful course.

One man who watched him silently from where he rested was Pinky Norman. As Paulsen continued to pace like a caged bear he roused out, pulled on his boots by the ears and walked into the starlight.

'Why don't we just go on to Lamson's, boss?' he began quietly.

They had argued about that all afternoon. Norman wanted to head there in the beginning because Caldwell's worry had been acute. But Paulsen had not believed the matter so serious. He avoided further discussion by asking once more for a report of what Caldwell gave the ramrod in town.

Repeating mechanically, Norman went through it all again. Paulsen walked away and back, halting to shift the Stetson on unruly red locks.

'Yet we didn't find one single steer around Indian Flats so branded!' he exclaimed.

'They moved them out of our way,' Norman alleged doggedly.

'How? Nary a sign of it. How could they know we was coming in? They didn't. I just wish I could find one of them steers!'

'So do I.'

'Maybe Caldwell was only telling you all that stuff in order to get quick help for the Lamsons?'

'Boss, he seen them steers like he said.'

'Yeah? He struck you as being a truthful gent?'

'He done so, and he's quite a boy, that Caldwell. I told you he denied being an officer. He could of used something like that to get us directly to the Lamsons if he was the lying kind.'

'Yeah,' Paulsen muttered darkly. 'Yeah.'

He resumed his pacing back and forth, unable to rest because of the seething turmoil in his mind.

'If they moved them steers, likely they got another place to hold them after they're worked on,' the cowman mused aloud. 'Now which way?'

That no man could hardly answer.

'Let's head for the Lamsons' to-night,' Norman suggested one more time, but without much hope. 'We could get in there by dawn.'

'How would you figger they moved them steers without leaving tell-tale sign behind?' Paulsen asked speculatively, hardly hearing Norman's words.

'Boss, it could be done and you know it!'

'Yeah, maybe by drifting slow,' the cowman admitted. 'We just missed somehow.'

'So that's by the board. Let's ride on——'

'Stow that, Pinky!' the cowman cried crankily. 'I'm busy on this. If I've got a range war on my hands in this thieves' basin, I want proof against the Buzzards. I got to have them god-damned steers!'

Norman gave up that he could prevail on the cowman to proceed to the Lamsons' aid. In injured silence he retreated to his blanket, removing boots for the second time that night. He lay down with the rest of his clothes on, wondering how stubborn Paulsen could really get if he put his mind to it.

The cowman walked over close to stare at him in the starlight.

'If Caldwell told you right about the drive-way being on the north side of the basin,' he spoke crisply, 'we could ride through to-night, well west of Indian Flats. Come daylight we trace a piece of that trail. Do we find tracks heading out made the last day or so, we'll have the right ones.'

Norman sat up.

'In case we don't?'

'It won't take long to know.' Paulsen's voice grated harshly. 'Right after sunup. Then we come back for Lamson's place regardless!'

'That I'll buy a hunk of!' Norman exclaimed. Shoving feet into boots he picked up his hat, and started rolling his sleeping blanket.

It was not necessary to yell roll-out at the crew. Most of them were wide awake, listening to the ramrod and the cowman talk. The others, merely dozing, were punched in the ribs to get them wide awake.

Cowboys streaked for the horses, bringing them in to saddle. The camp gear and supplies were repacked, the panniers lifted onto two mules. Halting here was delay they had not wanted in the first place. They had been on nervous edge all day, riding out basin country that could explode on them. Men could be bushwhacked from such cover as this without the killer being spotted at all.

The crew was glad to pull out, and at midnight Paulsen led into the northwest. They got a little rest at least, but a restless energy drove the cowman on.

His obstinance against proceeding to the Lamsons' drew from several reasons. One besides a war with the Buzzard brothers concerned a clever bunch of rustlers. For three straight years they had preyed on Judy. None had been caught. All thefts were cleanly gotten away with, just like this last bunch of steers. The thieves were cutting into him so deep now that the inroads were terrific losses Paulsen could not long survive. It was the seat of his hefty hate for drifters and hardcases. All were potential thieves in the making.

Now he knew that if he could find the misbranded steers, then he could put the rustlers out of business. One lone steer

to prove what Caldwell told Pinky Norman placed the guilt where it belonged. On the Buzzard brothers. Long before this night Paulsen had recognised certain indisputable facts. Not only were the thieves clever operators, but they had powerful backing in the country. It was that which sustained them, made them impossible to catch. And if the Buzzard brothers were behind the rustling scheme, then it all became as clear as a picture.

If and when he possessed the proof Paulsen would not hold back. He would attack, kill or run them all out of the country. Actually the basin range meant nothing to him. He had more than enough grass land to spare. The basin, as Sophie Jaltz had already proved, was fertile soil that should belong to farmers. They would come in time and the Buzzard brothers couldn't stop them. But he viewed their future with considerable doubt. Then again he warned himself not to jump to too quick conclusions. They risked everything if they had turned rustler.

The steers now, anxiously he hoped for success there. That brand would be the pay off. Tell him whether or not his Cross P was being reburned into the 3 B.

Judy reached the low rim of the basin, turning west along the base. Soon they rode to the edge of open country, the reaches of rolling prairie extending west unmarked by obstructions. This was 3 B's main range and on it cattle moved spottedly in the night.

Paulsen could not rest after they rode into a drive-way used often. He had to see for himself. While the crew pulled off to wait out the balance of the night he rode on alone. Dismounting, the cowman held hat to protect the feeble flame of struck matches. He examined a width of the trail, plainly observing the split hoof marks on the dry, dusty dirt between clumps of grass. All of them pointed east. This wide trace could be nothing more than the regular route used by the 3 B handling cattle.

He returned to the crew holding back disappointment that he was unable to discover anything as yet. In moody silence he unsaddled, hobbled his horse and slumped on the ground beside riding gear.

Pinky Norman slept little during the interval to dawn. Before morning clouds marred the sky he built a fire. A small one just big enough to cook biscuits and boil coffee. With that the crew ate cold roast meat, and saddled up again.

The gray was in the sky when they broke camp and headed west. Paulsen moving into the lead was joined by Norman. Only occasionally did either glance at the ground from the saddle. Any number of tracks pointing in the opposite direction from old ones would be noted quickly.

The sun was half an hour high and they were getting well into open country when Paulsen jerked his horse in sharply by the reins. His head turned left, and no words were necessary.

Their bad luck of the previous day suddenly reversed. For coming directly into the drive-way was a fresh trail from the south. A line of moving cattle that reaching the drive-way was swung by point riders on west.

Lifting right arm into the air as signal, Paulsen set forth at a fast trot. As they reached and passed the evidence Judy's cowboys straightened expectantly in their saddles. This day would not be wasted. They were headed for a fight.

In fact events rolled to a crisis faster than they could imagine. A mile on west the tracks swung out of the drive-way through a break in the low basin rim. Moving into it, Paulsen lifted his horse into a gallop. He made a turn west, thence into a bottleneck, where he pulled up faster than on discovering the trail of moving cattle.

Northward spread rolling mauve and slate gray low hills of the badlands. Some were streaked with red colours, but most interesting to him was the shallow flat lands of a pocket immediately at hand. In the centre was a lake of water showing whitish because of alkali content. Around it grew grass and an edible weed. Over that expanse of the pocket grazed a herd of big steers.

There was not in the open a single tree, or any visible evidence of a camp. This could be simply a holding place for stolen stock. Yet every fibre of the red-headed cowman tingled with anticipated discovery. He wanted the thieves when he found the steers.

His men were up, waiting quietly to the rear. Norman kicked

his horse over to him, and Paulsen gestured ahead. They advanced at a bare walk, close packed. Eyes drifted to the sides as they came out of the passage, and it was the cowman who saw the meagre camp under two stunted cottonwood trees. They came into being on the south side of the pocket, at the base of the rim that separated the basin from the badlands.

A little smoke hovered in the air over the camp, where three men sat eating late breakfast. Paulsen moved on at a walk, directly for them. Surprisingly, none of the men in camp stirred out or stood up to see who they were.

As a matter of fact Arch Quinn knew when they first broke cover. But after one cursory glance returned to eating. He did not imagine any riders would know how to get in here except some of the 3 B crew. Quinn was short handed too, for the rest of the bunch who helped complained angrily about the short amount of grub brought along. There was enough for a few men, not a big bunch. So Quinn told them to get on home and quit bellyaching.

In a matter of moments he was to rue that fact, to curse himself for being caught wholly off guard. It was when the riders abruptly came forward at a gallop that he sensed something amiss. The two 3 B cowboys with him discovered it earlier and leaped to their feet.

When Quinn followed suit, it was too late to fight. In the open against Judy's men they would be shot down in an instant. White faced, shaking a little, Quinn was first to elevate his hands shoulder high. The riders ringed them, fingers itchy on gun butts.

'Who owns them steers?' Paulsen asked, his blue eyes the bleakest Quinn had ever seen.

Quinn swallowed, trying to get words from a dry throat.

'3 B's,' he gulped. 'We put them in here overnight. Gonna drive on home to-day.'

The cowman's gaze travelled from him to the quaking pair. These men were plenty scared, and it was based on something they knew to be fatally dangerous.

'What you doing in the basin, Mr. Paulsen?' Quinn managed next. 'Looks like you're heading a war party.' He tried to chuckle with that statement, failing miserably.

Paulsen looked at his men. 'You boys hold them while me and Pinky have a look at them steers.'

As he pulled out the cowboys ordered the prisoners unshucked from their weapons. Norman galloped at his stirrup, and they did not have to go far to reach the first bunch of fat steers. The broad sides turned as the bovines moved out of the way. Paulsen pulled up with Norman, eyes wide on the fresh 3 B brands. For long moments he stared in disbelief, even though prepared for what he found.

'I'll be damned!' he exclaimed.

'Caldwell told it straight, eh, boss?' Norman said.

'No doubt of it. There's two mistakes in that reburned brand. Too heavy lines to cover corners and curves. But that connected 3 B is the last straw. They had to make it that way to get rid of the inside bar of the cross!'

Despite sufficient evidence, Paulsen rode grimly through most of the grazing steers. Everywhere he found the same thing. Swinging about for the camp his face was pasty hard, set in bitter lines. Norman siding him glanced at the sun very nearly overhead.

'If we hurry this up, boss,' he observed, 'we could get to Lamson's place around sundown. Catch all them that's there.'

Paulsen did not speak, lips compressed across his teeth. Rage boiled in him at how supposedly honest, respectable cattlemen fleeced him for three years. He entertained no doubt of it, that the Buzzard brothers were behind the thieves. But he would also make a test.

When they reached camp the three prisoners stood under the cottonwood tree with wrists bound behind their backs. Most of Judy's crew was dismounted, waiting patiently for the cowman to decide what followed next. As to that they had little doubt, and the thieves none at all.

Still, Paulsen failed to explode. While his face did not change from granite-like expression he studied Quinn curiously.

'Mighty good steers the 3 B's got,' he began. 'All you fellers work for the Buzzards?'

Quinn's eyes, bugged a little in surprise. That reburned 3 B was a real smart job. But was it good enough to fool the owner

of the worked over iron? Quinn took a chance that it was so, and plunged.

'You know so, Mr. Paulsen!' he exclaimed. 'But this now, you declared war on the 3 B? Seems like under the circumstances we should have had warning so we could of been ready.'

Ignoring him, Paulsen turned wooden faced to his men.

'Every steer there is them we chased to hell and gone after,' his cold voice spat on the air. 'Put them on their horses with a rope around their necks!'

Judy's crew jumped to obey. To them this was a rustler's merited fate. They brought in the thieves' horses, barely secured the cinches and boosted them into the saddles.

'You can't hang us like this!' one of them squalled loudly.

'You want to name the rest in the gang, who's backing you?' Paulsen demanded remorselessly.

'I ain't squealing on nobody!'

The cowman only gestured and the three prisoners' own ropes were fastened about their necks, tied short to limbs overhead.

The one who refused to talk in a gesture of contempt and bravado kicked his horse out from under himself. The animal leaped away, and the body of a man twisted in the air suspended by rope. The victim nearest Quinn took one wide-eyed look and with a curse at Judy's men followed suit.

Quinn took sick eyes from the two hanging bodies, swallowing painfully, facing the cold beat of the mounted men around him. No mercy there, and he too was going to die in a minute more.

'All right, Paulsen,' he said in a surprisingly firm voice. 'I've got what's coming, I reckon. But the real ones ain't none of us. Sure, we stole them steers. We've swiped a hell of a lot of your cattle. But us fellers, we got little out of it. Hardly more than regular wages!'

'So?' came coldly from the cowman.

'I'm telling you, they got the same waiting for them if there's any justice. The Buzzard brothers schemed this deal. They picked up fellers like us. On the dodge, needing to hide from the law. We done their regular work, and stole your Cross P stuff. You got to believe that because it's true!'

‘Where are they at now?’

‘Lamson’s place. All but Ewel. He was shot in town by a man named Caldwell. He’s one of your men, I reckon? Got all the dope on us so’s you could come hanging better men than any of your damned cowboys will ever be!’

Not prolonging the situation Paulsen brought his horse about, galloping for the lake of water. He did not look over a shoulder until passing into the far end of the pocket.

Norman and Judy’s crew strung out for each side of the grass land, surmising he wanted to gather the steers and throw them into the basin. Behind them marking the rim of the basin swung three men in the air. Rough justice, but it was the only way to stop thieves from operating.

Beyond the last steer Paulsen turned to start his own roundup sweep. Nearest him, Norman brought a gathering in and they proceeded south together. The cowboys closed in everywhere, pointing for the neck-like entrance into Rayado Basin.

‘We’ll shove them in and leave them there,’ the cowman said woodenly. ‘Go on for Lamson’s place on the creek.’

‘What about all that?’ Norman gestured at the camp, the saddled horses scattered far out, and the hanging bodies.

‘Somebody will come along,’ Paulsen decided. ‘Let it be a warning what’s going to happen to them thieves we catch.’

He reasoned the gruesome form of swift justice would send them out of the country in a hurry. Maybe so, but long before then he would be at the Buzzard brothers’ throats. He surveyed his riding men fondly, an emotion in him that would have surprised them. Paulsen calculated that he had enough men for a raid, hoping the casualties would be light. You could hire on a lot of cowboys before obtaining a crew like this one. All were hand picked and weeded out until he got the kind he wanted on Judy. A fighting bunch, and the warm feeling of pride in his crew roved through Paulsen.

13

FROM BEHIND a tree Ira heard the rider coming in. The guard appeared in the starlight far beyond the north end of the house to meet him. His ejaculation echoed on the air, 'Latt! You're back already?' Whatever the rider, Latt Kinny, told him was very low. Talking stopped and they disappeared around the upper end of the house.

Ira retreated east to the lower edge of the timber where he could watch the front of the house. The unexpected return of one of the bunch indicated at least a small emergency if not worse. Ira arrived in time to see the guard and Kinny walking to the porch. Stepping up on it they hurried on to the lighted kitchen door. Only an indistinct mumble of voices issued therefrom. Nor did that go on for long before a bunch of men exited hurriedly. Most went to the barn to get out horses and saddle. Next appeared those from the cabin, who joined them.

They were soon ready to ride, Cheyenne, Tiny and Pete tying on war sacks behind their saddles. Observing that, it occurred to Ira they were pulling out for good. The surprised hope of the move was still in him when Simp Buzzard hurried out of the kitchen and over the porch for the barn. Deke was most prominent in the bunch, and seemed to argue with his brother a few moments. When it ended the whole group headed west on the road through the timber.

The dog, an interested watcher from before the house now returned to hunker down on the porch. Ira regarded the premises in mild disbelief, wondering what happened.

The Lamsons appeared on the porch, the old man remaining close to the door, holding his heavy rifle. Ruth went hurriedly to the upper end to reconnoitre the cut swath in the timber through which the road ran. She came back, saying something in a happy voice. Lamson dropped inside the kitchen. Ruth

moved slowly from the block of light, and Ira entering the open space gave a sharp whistle. At once she came to a halt, head tilted like a bird listening. Then she appeared to recognise both Ira and the whistle belatedly.

She rushed off the porch, meeting him just beyond it. Ruth was crying too, silent, tears beading on her cheeks.

'They are gone!' she got out in a husky whisper. 'The whole rapscaillon crew left just now!'

'I know.' He held her tight, toting the rifle in the left arm while enclosing her slender waist with the right on the way to the porch. Lamson appeared abruptly through the doorway, Ruth not breaking away from Ira's arm.

As the old man disappeared inside the kitchen, they mounted the porch to enter behind him. He sat at the far side of the table, having poured a cup of coffee. Deliberately refraining from glancing up at them he lifted the cup to his hairy mouth. Ruth moved on the side of the table, embarrassed and concerned.

She began hesitantly, 'Father, I've been wanting to tell you about Mr. Caldwell. I- - ' her voice trailed off as he raised eyes directly at her.

'Ruthie, you needn't bother. I've known all along. Sometime or other a woman finds her a man. The way life is supposed to be. At least,' his gaze shifted quickly to Ira, who met the full force of their penetration, 'there's one man hanging around here got an honest reason for doing so!'

Ira went closer to them.

'Mr. Lamson, you folks took me in and treated me kindly when I was bad shot,' he began. 'Then I realised the situation here was very bad. Ruth in a mess of no-goods. Hardcases, outlaws and worse. I reckon it hit me hardest when I found that Ruth meant much to me. In fact, I'm in love with her.'

'Sit down, son,' Lamson answered mildly. 'Don't get all wrapped up in your own rope. Why shouldn't you care for her? Ruthie is a girl worth having.'

'Father!' she exclaimed, flushing pink in the lamp light.

Ira took a chair, and Ruth got him a cup of coffee before joining the men at the table. The cowboy sat so he could watch through the dog, always checking on the dog's alertness first.

The animal would[^]arouse while incoming men were still far enough for him to do something about it.

'Calkilate I better go about projecting,' Lamson allowed. 'To keep them rascals out of here[^] for good.'

'I made it to town and appealed to Judy for help,' Ira told them then. 'I'm surprised they haven[^]t showed up—if they were coming at all. By the way, why did the Buzzards pull out?'

Lamson, his eyes steady on the cowboy when he mentioned asking for help, now shrugged his shoulders. They knew only that a messenger came to the house and thereafter the bunch got ready to leave in a hurry. Simp summoned them for one more argument about selling the place for a song, and left after delivering final warning.

'There was some mighty powerful reason for them scamps to saddle and ride,' the old man stated positively.

Ira, after devoting a period to thought, grinned at them.

'The only one important enough that I can think of is that Judy's crew is in the basin -I hope!'

'In which case it means war between them and the 3 B,' Lamson declared. 'I'm wondering if Paulsen dares risk it. He'll sure have a big fight on his hands. Maybe even bigger than he can handle. Them Buzzards have got plenty of tough characters hangin^g around handy.'

Ira considered him a moment, and then said, 'Right now there's only two of the brothers able to get around. I was forced to shoot Ewel in Shoeton.'

Ruth met the casual statement with a sharp intake of breath. Lamson's eyes narrowed to slits, and having finished his coffee got out a cob pipe, tamping it slowly with rough cut tobacco.

Striking a sulphur match he held it over his pipe saying cryptly, 'That and what you done to them here makes you an army all by yourself.'

Since the hour was late and they might not be free for long, Ira turned to the matter of precautions for the future. He suggested they take horses and saddles across the creek so that Ruth and Lamson could escape in case the Buzzard brothers returned. The old man did not reject the plan outright. He stated that for the next few days at least, ~~they~~ would not

be molested. Lamson found ways to evade a direct settling of the question. Ira felt helpless because he knew the old man actually opposed any plan of leaving the small ranch to protect Ruth if not himself also.

He faced her, asking if she knew Sophie Jaltz.

'Why, yes,' she answered. 'I see her maybe two or three times a year. But we never have time to visit.'

'She'd take you in, I'm sure. How would it be for you to go stay with her a while?'

She regarded him in silence so long, a kind of curious light in her eyes that he feared having made the wrong move.

'I'm thinking of your safety while we figger out how to get rid of all these hardcases running loose in the basin,' he said hopefully.

She smiled then.

'I am not leaving you and father,' she replied convincingly.

'We may have to take to the brush!'

'Then I go there with you men folks. But I do like the idea of putting horses and saddles east of the creek in case we must run.'

He told her of his earlier plan, before Kinny dashed in. Of taking her out through the sliding window in the rear wall. When he finished that she nodded her head.

'I could escape that way any time. Which is why I think we should keep horses across the creek. I could even go for help, if I had to,' she tacked on quickly. Ruth patently wanted them to be encouraged and not fretting about the danger to her.

Lamson said stiffly, 'There ain't no earthly reason why we got to be run off our own place!'

The old man resented the fact it might be necessary. He hated the men who would deny him the privilege of conducting his own affairs on the place where he belonged. Yet Simp Buzzard's threats were far from being idly made. Worse, the hardcases who lived at the small ranch so long were now more of a menace than before. They knew all the trails, the cattle runs and where Lamson was accustomed to riding. That knowledge equipped a bushwhack killer with what he needed for an easy shooting. Ira mentioned these things tentatively, and brought them into the open as Lamson did not cloud in

sudden anger. The old man even inclined his head in agreement with the cowboy.

'I'm smarter'n that,' he opined sombrely and without bragging. 'Done figgered it all out. Don't aim to ride cattle runs and trails where I used to. I've been a brush popper in my time, and I can take care of myself.'

Lamson wasn't going to be argued with about that. When Ira caught Ruth's eyes on him she shook her head. Stubborn or not and the old man being within his rights, it was still dangerous to stay on the place. Yet Ira could do no more with him.

He got some extra cartridges for the rifle, and a single blanket. When he reached the door he paused a moment.

'I'm sleeping in the barn,' he said.

Lamson nodded his head.

'Got something I want you to look-see at to-morrow,' he spoke up. 'See what you make of it.'

Just that bare statement, no more. Ira waited and as Lamson did not open his mouth again, he told them both good night. The dog went along to the barn with him. To be close to possible danger if it came unexpectedly, Ira fixed himself a sleeping place in the saddle shed.

The dog stayed with him the remainder of the night, bouncing eagerly around when Ira stirred out in the gloom of dawn. Dressing, he cradled the rifle in the left arm and passed through the barn to the outer end.

From there Ira scouted completely around the premises, seeking sign of a possible marauder skulking in wait. The dog kept quiet and at his heels during the reconnoitring. Returning to the barn Ira put the rifle away and commenced the feeding. Lamson appeared to slop the hogs and milk the cow, and having finished at the barn Ira went to the house. Taking the water buckets after greeting Ruth who cooked at the stove, he packed them full from the creek.

Lamson was in and breakfast on the table when he got back. They all sat down to eat, little talk ensuing. Each was busy with consideration of the future.

At the end of the meal Lamson said, 'Ruthie, we'll leave your horse and saddle across the creek where he's put his dun

I'm going to show him something for his say-so on.' We'll likely be gone most of the day.'

She nodded her head.

'I won't be in the house much. Have been wanting to go berrying for some time. I'll be picking blackberries in the south woods, so if any of them should come back while you're gone I won't be handy.'

The morning was long when Ira went out to the barn with Lamson. He got Ruth's pony, and saddled. Ira rode it, hanging his legs down from the short stirrups, not wanting to bother changing them. Crossing the creek below the barn they turned upstream to the spot where Ira's horse grazed.

While he saddled, Lamson took care of Ruth's pony, caching the riding gear conveniently close. The old man having lapsed into one of his habitual long periods of silence, simply led the way on south. Ira followed, wondering what was in Lamson's mind.

They rode for three miles before he turned over the creek, fording on a reef of solid stone. Thereafter he roved the timber slowly, searching for something special. Ira was puzzled because he suspected it was cattle. Yet they encountered a good many of Lamson's cows, branded Windowsash DL, with big calves. There were a few steers too, three's and four's so fat they moved lazily on the approach of riders.

It was noon when Lamson stopped abruptly on the edge of a glade. Five cows with silky-looking white faced calves lay on the ground under shade trees. They lifted sluggishly to feet, moving away unhurriedly. Lamson pointed at the brands on their ribs.

'What do you reckon was the *real* brand on them critters?'

Ira's eyes went over all irons quickly, including that of the calves. Their brands were sharp and distinct, pecked evenly and hairing over from spring roundup. Yet the same brands on the cows, though beginning to hair out, were thickly barred. It was a common enough windowsash followed by the letters D L. Yet the lines of the windowsash and the upper part of the D were much too wide, for a simple running iron job. Nine times out of ten such wide lines gave immediate notice

of a rebranded brand. One changed into another symbol entirely. However, that was not always the case.

While the cows and calves slowed on their way from the glade Ira shrugged his shoulders.

'You got me,' he said. 'Usually I can read through a critter's hide. That's a very clever rebranded job, if one. You got some reason to believe so?'

The old man's eyes were a little frosty. Ira produced his tobacco sack and rolled a smoke.

'Last spring I counted my cows,' Lamson divulged in a raspy voice. 'Had a hundred and eighteen head of producers. Them I saw with my own eyes.' He paused while Ira lit his cigarette and puffed the first smoke.

'Well, along come them three fellers,' Lamson continued. 'They throwed in to help a mite. First off, we found some cows with the brands faint. Mighty poorly. So that feller Cheyenne, he says 'Old man, that's sure inviting a thief to help himself.' He said that, and them others agreed. Of course they was right. We brought in them cows and rerun the brands. I means, they did and they was purty good at it. A few more as time went on.'

'But they done a lot of running around on their own account. Next thing I find quite a passel of cows with fresh rebrands between the ranch and Injun Flats. They disappear from there, and show up in these parts. Somebody brung them here. Them hardcases.'

When he stopped, Ira nodded his head, not commenting as yet.

'We-ell, dag-gone,' Lamson spoke again in his rusty voice. 'Right this minute, betcha I got three hundred of them cows with fresh brands.' Again he paused, eyeing Ira sharply, before adding in a dry chuckle, 'Maybe I got a new breed of cow critters. One's their calves grows into three and four year old sizes in one year!'

So Lamson had long been wise to some of the secret shenanigans the three hardcases pulled while using his place as a blind to work from. This, and it wound up somehow with rustling. The Indian Flats job for an additional chore. But wisely the old man kept knowledge of the discoveries to himself.

One peep that he knew and they certainly would have put him in an unknown grave to save themselves. Ira felt a little nervous, and worried. He glanced idly in the direction the cows and calves wandered off.

'Reading the back side of the hide is the only sure way to determine it,' he reminded. 'Them cows all got calves. No good knocking one of them over.'

Lamson gestured south, and took to the timber again. Riding unhurriedly, wandering back and forth over a wide stretch of range the middle of the afternoon came and passed. They found many cows with calves, but none suitable for the purpose wanted.

Finally, when the basin rim perched in the sky beyond the timber Lamson pulled rein, pointing a gnarled finger to a fat cow trotting along with several steers that had been routed off bedground on their approach.

'The only mistake they made,' the old man announced. 'Reckon rustlers can't tell a barren cow by moonlight!'

Putting his horse into a trot Ira took after the cow and alongside, drew his gun. At the right moment he fired a bullet into the back of the cow's head. The animal fell away, collapsing on the left side in the brush.

Dismounting he walked in with clasp knife out. Cutting around the large brand he pocketed the knife. Tearing a corner of the hide loose he peeled off the square with a quick jerk. When he turned to leave the brush Lamson had come up and sat his saddle holding Ira's horse.

The cowboy walked over in the last bright sunlight of day, holding the flesh side of the hide in it. He did not have to inspect it long, for the original brand worn by that cow was plain. The long ago healed scar tissue on the underneath side of the hide formed a reversed Cross P. Judy's brand had been burned on with a stamp iron, cleanly and neatly.

Handing the piece of hide to Lamson, Ira shifted without a word to the side of his horse and mounted. He felt a little sick too, for the three hardcases had used Lamson's honestly registered brand to work stolen cattle into. Cows taken along with the more profitable theft of steers. Brought to light now was a more compelling reason why the Buzzard brothers

wanted Lamson's place then to get him out of the basin. They had already, or soon would, rebrand a lot of Judy's cows into the Windowsash DL. By purchase they could take *legal* ownership of those cattle or buy it at public auction if no Lamsons survived. If by pure accident a few were proven to be stolen they had a legitimate out. The 3¢B bought all the cattle from Lamson. Ergo, the rustling must have been done by him. That was how Ira reasoned the deal for it was an old stunt used many times before in the West.

Rolling the hide Lamson tied it on his saddle, glancing at the low sun.

'Reckon it's time we got back,' he observed. 'Ruthie will be wondering if we done been bushwhacked.'

He rode slumped forward in the saddle, yet in his bushy face a pair of keen eyes watched everywhere. If he was worried about another matter Lamson failed to show the least sign of it.

Ira wondered on that score, for if Paulsen got wise to this rustler deed most likely he would treat the old man as any other thief. If objection arose, Lamson would find it almost hopeless trying to prove those cows went into his brand entirely without his knowledge.

14

WHEN THE Judy outfit drove the recovered steers into the basin, Paulsen changed his mind about leaving them loose there. The Buzzard brothers could make away with them and thus protect themselves. Though he did not intend to give them that much time, Paulsen continued driving south across the basin. He did not reveal the changed plan until reaching the main road at about the centre. Then he called Norman to him.

'Pinky, take three of the boys and the pack mules on with you,' he said stiffly. 'Put the steers on the plateau and come back close to the main road in the basin. If we don't meet you there, ride on to Lamson's place. We'll have treed the Buzzard outfit by that time.'

Norman took the orders without comment. He called out the men he wanted. The rest joined Paulsen, watching him covertly for they were curious as to the abrupt shift of his earlier stated intentions.

It was after noon when Paulsen led his men east across the rougher and more covered part of the basin. Here it was best to keep on the alert and doing so the cowman was slowed down some. They had made good time all along during the day so that it was not quite sundown when they reached the woods' road into the Lamson place.

Calling the others to a halt, Paulsen proceeded alone to the edge from where he could reconnoitre the premises. There existed no evidence of anybody on the place. Puzzled, he remained watching ten minutes longer before waving his cowboys in.

The cavalcade rode into the open between house and barn, the cowboys widening and watching in all directions for any eventuality. Paulsen continued part way to the house before dismounting. Advancing for the porch he got the odd sensation

that someone spied from the house. A moment later the dog hit the porch barking. Paulsen stopped still, annoyed.

'Hello in there!' he called loudly. 'This is the Judy crew. Anybody to home?'

Ruth appeared through the kitchen door, quieting the dog promptly. Not until she spoke did Paulsen realise the figure in the old overalls and a man's shirt was she. When she straightened around towards him he touched fingers to his hat, but not the ghost of a smile or grin marked his face. The cowman was taut and hard.

'Any of the men to home, ma'm?' he asked when she reached him at the porch edge.

'No, father and Mr. Caldwell went off to work on the range somewhere this morning.'

'The Buzzard brothers?'

'Oh, yes. Mr. Caldwell told us he had appealed for help. The whole bunch of them left last night soon after a messenger arrived.'

She told him what had happened at the small ranch, but was unable to answer any questions as to the messenger's business, or why the 3 B outfit left so quickly.

Paulsen without mentioning it decided that he knew. The Buzzard brothers had discovered Judy's crew in the basin. Where they went puzzled him for they cut no sign of a considerable body of riders in the basin headed in any direction.

'You don't have any idea where they pulled out for, ma'm?' he asked, only barely hopeful.

'No, sir. Mr. Paulsen, Simp Buzzard is bound and determined to get this place. They have papers already made out. Tried to force father to sign them. When he left Simp Buzzard told father that now he would have him k-killed!'

The cowman's face did not change harsh expression.

'Ma'm, you folks don't need to worry about the Buzzard brothers no more. Pretty soon we're going to be shut of them.'

'You don't think they will be back here to torment us?' she asked in doubtful concern.

'Ma'm, I don't think what's left of them will be harming anybody no more.'

That statement perplexed her yet Ruth kept quiet on the score.

'Well, I think father and Mr. Caldwell have prepared for quick flight if they do return.'

'You won't need to run away,' his voice shook with steel. 'I'll handle them people for good. Caldwell, now, he's liable to be in to-night?

'I don't think they planned to remain away this long,' she hastened to say. 'I'm sure they will ride in any minute. Mr. Paulsen, we'd be obliged if you'd stay. I'll have supper ready soon. It won't take me much longer.'

Paulsen hesitated, going out from the porch roof to glance at the sun. Tree shadows matted the ground almost solid now. Then he faced her again, shaking his head.

'Thanky, kindly, ma'm. But we need to be riding.' That was true enough, to connect with the rest of the crew and keep moving. The Buzzard brothers knowing all this time they were in the basin had had ample opportunity to prepare for repelling Judy in force.

'Mr. Caldwell will be disappointed not to see you,' she thought to say. 'I'll tell him that Judy came to help if they could.'

Paulsen nodded his head at her.

'Glad to find things all right here, ma'm. Uh, you might tell Caldwell we found what he told Pinky Norman, and we're riding west. Nothing in the basin I can't handle now. He might stay around with you folks a few days longer, however. Just in case a couple or so slip through bent on meanness.'

He tipped his hat again, leaving her standing without knowing what to say. The cowman was wholly like a rock, unbendable, determined on some course he followed. She watched him mount, gesture at his men and lead out at a gallop. On the road the timber quickly covered them, and their sound faded into the distance.

Ruth shuddered, and returned to the kitchen. There had been something ominous and dreadful about the cowman. He was firm and purposeful, an implacable enemy. Whereas the Buzzard brothers were only wantonly cruel.

She had returned from the woods with two pails of berries, making a pie of the ripest for supper. Now she pulled them from the oven, and surveyed the rest of supper food. It was

ready and sundown had come. The men were going to be unexpectedly late, and she began to worry.

With no more to do in the kitchen she slopped and fed the hogs, and then milked the cow. She was hardly back to the house when the dog lit out for the barn. Ruth slipped outside on the porch, discovering they had come across the creek afoot and were doing the other chores. A satisfied sense of peace came to Ruth and she lighted the lamps in the kitchen.

She had the table filled when they came in appearing tired. Ira grinned at Ruth, holding her hand a minute. Not until they sat down to eat and were half-way finished did she tell them about Paulsen's visit. At once Ira halted all else to listen to her account intently. She repeated the exact words the cowman said to her. Ira ran them through his mind and could draw only one logical conclusion. The Judy outfit raided in the basin. Paulsen found the misbranded steers and it had sent him off on a wrathful rampage against thieves. It was, in short, a fight to the end now between the two big outfits. In that respect Ira pondered, feeling the same doubt formerly expressed by Lamson. That Paulsen took on quite a battle when he jumped the Buzzard brothers. But from his past history he reasoned that the cowman would not be deterred by risks. A rustler was a rustler, and prime for hanging when caught.

Paulsen left word he was riding west, and as he returned to eating after Ruth finished talking, restlessness raised in Ira. Indeed, it was coupled with grave apprehension. The messenger last night meant Judy's presence was discovered too soon. So now somewhere in the basin Simp Buzzard would be waiting for him.

By riding west Paulsen indicated an attack on the 3 B. Quite an undertaking that would require a large crew. Even then all the breaks must be with them if they accomplished much. Thinking in terms of numbers of fighting men, Ira asked Ruth how many riders accompanied Paulsen.

'There were seven,' she replied, uneasily watching him.

'Pack outfit?'

'No, just Mr. Paulsen and seven cowboys.'

He inclined his head. The absence of a pack outfit with the band told him there were more than came to Lamson's place.

Ira arose from the table to help Ruth do the dishes, still in a quandary of indecision. Lamson remained at the table, smoking his cob pipe restfully.

'Sounded like Steve Paulsen figgered he'd the same as wiped out the Buzzards' 3 B,' he spoke in a pondering manner.

Ira gave him a sharp glance.

'I think maybe he anticipated too much, and knew it. Recollect what he said to Ruth about maybe some on the get-away might come out this end of the basin?'

Lamson inclined his head.

'Travelling west from here means Judy will have to do a lot of fast riding to reach there by midnight or a little after. Paulsen is starting almost from scratch. Unless,' he paused to ruminate on the possibility, 'they done had one fight in which Judy wiped out a batch of them.'

Ira became more harsh of countenance and when the dishes were done he moseyed over to the end of the table. A moment he caught Ruth's attention elsewhere and motioned meaningly at Lamson with his head.

'Yeah, I expect we'd better watch good,' he drawled, pretending a casualness he did not feel. 'Think I'll go fork my horse and ride around some. Take a scout.'

He strolled for the door, and into the shadows of the porch. For a moment he feared Lamson did not get his hint. Then the old man called out on the way to the door.

'Hold on!' He emerged on the porch, still talking high pitched. 'Wisht you'd short hobble my horse when you leave. Critter might not be located enough to stay there on its own.'

By the time that was said Lamson joined Ira on the lower end of the porch. The cowboy leaned over slightly to speak in a whisper.

'You're alive this minute because them hardcases never caught on you knew about the rebrands,' he warned. 'Realise it, Mr. Lamson?'

'Don't worry on my account, son,' Lamson answered stiffly. 'They figgered me for a doddering old fool. I buried the branded hide in the barn so if they come back they still won't have nothing on me.'

Ira said, 'Good enough. I wanted to be certain. It's a damned dangerous situation. Even for Paulsen.'

'He won't have to worry about *them* cattle at least,' came gruffly.

Stepping off the porch Ira petted the dog a moment, and strode on into the near timber. He walked hurriedly to the creek and over to the stock, saddling his horse:

Riding to the creek he forded, and did set about making a thorough scout of the dangerous area adjacent to the premises. He found no skulkers, as expected. While the two forces jockeyed for any advantage and fought, the Lamson place should be comparatively secure. Returning to the woods' road in the timber he drew rein, smoking while lounging in the saddle.

He wanted to scout up the basin, yet knew he could not now travel to within sight of the 3 B ranch and return by daylight. It was likely that heavy action impended there. He would like to know if there had been skirmishes already. The situation could be fraught with disaster. Or maybe just anywhere from the conclusive end Paulsen imagined, to worse. The big battle between Judy and the 3 B was none of his affair. Yet the outcome between the big outfits held the fate of the Lamsons. With only that was he concerned, and with the restless urge to be moving on him again Ira took the wagon road.

Quitting the narrow open strip the road swung southward into easier travelled country. Ira whipped up some, soon crossing the short side of the basin to the rim. Cutting a triangle here, he mounted through a cut onto the height overlooking the low range.

In the distance towards the 3 B, which he could not see, no light of any kind appeared. No big gunfight was going on either, the gentle night breeze bringing no echo of sound at all. One light existed however, down under the rim west of where he reconnoitred. That would be Sophie Jaltz's farm. She might know something, and since she was still up Ira descended the rim to rack through the scattered stands of junipers.

The light vanished from sight as soon as he did. But he managed to follow surely by instinct for the lighted window and door of her immaculate kitchen broke before him as soon as he cleared the surrounding timber.

Slowing to a walk as the dogs set up loud barking, he saw them come out into the starlight. Sophie appeared through the door, yelling commandingly at the dogs to hush. They retreated part way to the yard, while Ira dismounted against the last stand of timber. There he tied, and walked into the starlight. Sophie remained standing there, though she knew who he was almost at once. Coming up even with the dogs he spoke to them in a casual voice and kept moving. Leaving his horse under cover was a protective measure not lost on her. Sophie greeted him unconcernedly when he reached the porch.

'Come in,' she invited. 'Perhaps next time you will remember to come in the daytime?'

'I'm sorry,' he replied lamely. 'Saw your light and since you was still awake, just wandered in.' He entered the lighted kitchen, taking his hat off.

A smile wreathed her rounded, broad face, eyes kindling a little.

'I happened to be joking,' she replied earnestly. 'You are always welcome here. It is that I mentioned daytime in reference that maybe you would be afraid to visit except at night.'

'Coffee?'

He nodded, and sat at the table on the inside end away from the door. Watching her deft movements as she filled two cups he held hat on his knees, and suspicioned what she referred to by the last statement.

She joined him, sat down and passed the sugar bowl. Carefully her eyes surveyed him.

'After you left the other day I heard guns shooting in the timber. Did they lay for you?'

He grinned.

'It cost them, and later I had to wound Ewel in Shoeton. By the way, there's some doings in the basin. Hear of any big fights, or riders chasing around after each other?'

A few silent moments she studied him solemnly, and shook her head.

'It worried me about you that day. Not once since have I seen or heard any riders at all in this part of the basin. Why, what is going on?'

'The Buzzard brothers had seized the Lamson place. Then they pulled out suddenly. Must have discovered Judy's crew in the basin. Now Paulsen has ridden west. You know what that may mean.'

Slowly Sophie inclined her head, her expression becoming one of deep concern.

'The Lamsons?' she queried.

'All right, but for a while I wasn't betting much on it.' Then because his tiredness relaxed he talked of the skirmishes around the small ranch. Sophie listened and in her quiet, mature way she encouraged him to go on.

'Do you think you could possibly get Ruth to come stay with me?' she asked hopefully when he slacked to silence.

'I tried already,' he replied. 'She wouldn't listen. Insists on staying with her father. I expect,' his voice rang with the admiration he felt for her courage, 'if she hadn't stayed through them bad days something might of happened to him at that.'

She regarded him curiously. 'You are in love with Ruth, aren't you?' She made it more a statement than a question. Coming from Sophie in her sincere way he did not resent it at all.

'I am,' he admitted quietly. 'That makes an added burden, worrying about her safety with all them hardcases around.'

She nodded understandingly.

'I can sympathise with her desire to stay with her men folks,' she answered gravely. 'Should she have to be moved from there suddenly, will you please remember that I'd be only too glad for her to stay with me?'

'Thank you,' he replied in a husky voice. 'This is the second time I've ever seen you. But from the first I knowed you was real people.'

'You do not know whether there have been any fights between the two outfits as yet?' she changed the subject, a flush in her tanned cheeks.

'No, which was why I got spooky to-night. Kind of hoping that Judy would put the brothers in their places.'

Something in his voice caught her sudden attention. 'But you don't hope much on it?'

'The Buzzard brothers in their several operations in the basin have got quite a few real bad men. If Paulsen don't use his head, just rushes in wild, they'll fill him full of holes.'

She smiled, but not in amusement.

'I've known Steve Paulsen a good many years,' she said. 'He is a hard man. Rocky, they used to call him. If he is after the Buzzard brothers he has sufficient reason, and he won't stop until he gets them. Or vice versa, as you fear.'

He stood off the chair. 'Reckon I'd best be going. Thanks for the visit.'

'You're tired. Want to occupy the corner room to-night?'

'Thanks, ma'm. I'll make a circle in the basin on my way back. Could run into something.'

'I do hope it all turns out for the best,' she said sincerely.

Sophie accompanied him to the door, waiting to watch Ira reach his horse. When he rode off she retreated inside the kitchen again, gathering up the cups and saucers. She was lonely in the basin. Lately she pined for the people she missed, the neighbours in the days when her husband was alive. But maybe, she thought and smiled to herself, the basin scrap would be finished soon. When Caldwell and Ruth married she reasoned they would enlarge and run the Lamson place. Twenty miles away they might be, but they were neighbours who might have time for visiting back and forth. Life would then be a little more bearable.

15

SIMP BUZZARD had been unable to sleep much all night. With the first break of dawn he quit his bunk, dressed and started a fire in the sheet iron stove. With him in this cabin was Cheyenne, Tiny, Pete, Kinny and Buttons Stover. Only three men of the regular crew in the second cabin, for the day before Deke took the others back to 3 B ranch. Since they had not found anything, he reasoned that Paulsen going out by Lamson's place quit the basin altogether, or would this morning. Still, for all his theory of that a tingling nervousness beset him. If Paulsen really jumped on them, and there was actually no guessing how much he knew, he would do it in swift, grand style.

Simp sauntered to the open door biting off a chew of tobacco. He gained it, shoving the plug into a hip pocket, and heard the ragged galloping of a horse already worn down. In an instant he was on the alert. A rider coming in that manner must be on most urgent business.

Wheeling around Simp called into the end of the cabin where the bunks were built into the walls, 'Come alive! We're catching something in our trap!'

He could hear them stirring awake and faced the open again. The rider broke through the timber from the next flat, hanging way over in the saddle. The horse's speed diminished to a trot, and then Simp swore as he recognised Deke. He jumped down over the threshold fast, hurrying to gather in the horse that came most of the way home without guidance.

When he got the animal headed Simp reached upward trying to get Deke out of the saddle. There was dried and fresh blood over it, all over Deke, who wouldn't release his stranglehold on the horn.

'Come out of it, Deke!' Simp cried. 'I'll get you off and into the cabin!'

Cheyenne appeared in bare feet with only his pants and gun belt on. After him towered Tiny, and it was the huge man who

reached with powerful arms to gather Deke out of the saddle. Despite the wounded man's bulky size, Tiny lifted him easily, and carried him into the cabin. Stover came to them along with Pete, and the youngster of the bunch was given Deke's horse to put away.

Simp hurried after Tiny with Deke, the gray of new morning changing to yellow. Inside it was still dark and he lighted a lamp in the cooking end of the cabin, carrying it to the bunk-space where Tiny had Deke on a lower mattress.

The light revealed Deke's eyes open, his bloodless face turned towards Simp as he set the lamp on the square table in the centre of the floor. Others crowded in by then, most taking one look at the middle of Deke Buzzard's body and going cemetery quiet.

'They killed me, Simp,' Deke husked out. 'Shot me through the belly and I'm a goner.'

Simp did not express any sorrow or give him any sympathy. He stared, his face mottling, nor did he ask how it happened as yet. His voice lifted harshly in the room.

'Since they'd killed you why didn't you stay there and get some of them instead of running away, Deke?'

The wounded man whispered hoarsely, 'Cheyenne, pull my boots off. Don't want to go with them on. Some died that way to-day, and some was just hung.'

Cheyenne moved quickly, shucking the boots from his feet. Simp walked closer to the bunk, his face dark with wrath now. 'Tell us about it, Deke.'

'Acted like you didn't want to know,' Deke said to him. 'Busted myself loose all inside getting here to tell you.'

'Okay, Deke, it happened at the ranch?' Only then did his voice soften the least bit.

'What ranch? It's burned plumb to the ground by now!'

Simp exploded, 'What the hell you talking about?'

'I'm telling you. They hit us at midnight. Anyway, between then and one o'clock. They sneaked in and set the house afire. Then they shot down everybody they could running out of it. Downed Fwel not yet well, the cook, couple other fellers. I tell you, not more than three got away and I reckon they won't stop running for a week.'

'Mc, I'd just come back from town late. With two of the boys. Put our horses away. Had a bottle left and was sitting in the shed finishing it off. Saw the blaze lighted up first. Was set on the other side of the house. Some was sent around to cover the front, and then's when we mixed.

'Got shot, and one of the men with me died on the ground. Dunno what happened to the other. Crawled inside the barn. Saddled and rode out the back.

'I couldn't help nobody. Could hardly stay in the saddle. Over on the hill, stood there and watched the fight. Saw what happened because the fire made it light as day.

'Then I come away. No more shooting going on. A couple of miles off I looked back and saw the barn and the rest of the whole shebang going up in smoke. They sure burned 3 B to the ground.' Deke stopped there, coughing painfully.

Simp paced the floor, yet was not swearing over the disastrous news. Ewel was dead. Deke would be before long. All at once he slowed over near the bunk.

'Who was it, Deke?'

'Goddlemighty!' the dying man gasped incredulously. 'Who else except Judy?'

'Why so, when they don't savvy no reason to make sudden war on us?'

'The hell they don't!' Deke got out with surprising vigour. 'I made for the badlands, figgering I'd get help there. What I found was Arch Quinn and two more hanging by ropes to them cottonwoods in the south end of the pocket. All them steers was gone. So Paulsen finally run down where his cow critters been disappearing to. You think he don't know what he's about, now?'

Deke closed his eyes wearily, and Simp shifted to the table. He sought to figure this out, to analyse the evidence and what it meant. Next he remembered one man and his face turned dark while his neck corded thick.

'It's that damned Caldwell's doing!' he gasped. 'He snooped around for the dope and passed it to Paulsen who jumped without warning!'

Tiny swung ponderously on his stumpy legs, his eyes blinking.

'You think that's what happened?'

'Right on the nose. That cuss has been bad medicine since he landed in the basin!'

'Maybe,' came from Cheyenne. 'But how come he first mixed with Judy? They shot him up pretty bad to begin with.'

'Probably a phoney deal!'

'Simp, I saw them "wounds," Cheyenne declared.

'Whatever, we're in for trouble, Simp calmed some, only to burst forth anew. 'I'll make that deed the costliest Paulsen ever paid for! I'll hang him personally myself when we get him.

'Deke,' he took a step for the bunk, 'you got any idea how many they was, and which way they rode from the ranch?'

Only silence from the bunk and when Cheyenne leaned over Deke Buzzard it was only for a moment.

'He's gone, Simp,' Cheyenne said tonelessly, moving away.

For once in his life Simp Buzzard found himself at a complete loss to plan ahead. He covered it with a brisk manner and turned them all to work getting ready for whatever the day brought forth.

Stover was despatched with a rifle to watch for any possible riders approaching. Simp did not believe that could happen for hours, if at all. But from here on he would be prepared for a battle. One man was turned to cooking breakfast, and the others fed the stock, and dug a grave behind the first cabin. When all that was done he hurried them in for breakfast and afterwards they wrapped Deke in a woollen blanket and buried him.

While they saddled up, getting ready to ride, Simp came out of his dazedness at being left alone of his family and the destruction of the ranch. Material property could be replaced, and Ewel and Deke had been of no more use to him than any other hired hand on the pay-roll. Simp had always done the scheming and the running of the combined outfit. No change there, and the loss he felt temporarily would leave him in a few days.

When he grew optimistic Simp's cunning brain went to work. Paulsen might have withdrawn from the basin after destroying 3 B. Judy's crew should need a breather. However, it was also possible the mad Paulsen would try to make a clean sweep

before quitting. When he reflected on the man's utter hate for thieves, Simp rather imagined that was how it must be.

Paulsen had not ducked back into Indian Flats to make sure of them there, hence he failed to consider its importance. Yet this day he could be searching the basin and Indian Flats would come in for belated attention.

Considering that, Simp became uneasy that Judy swung out from the 3 B and maybe were coming for a raid. Best to get out from under until they knew. Doing that Simp would lay a trap for Paulsen by just being on guard. That appeared so simple he began to hope it would happen that way. The brush and rocks around the flats made ideal places for setting a murderous bushwhack.

Simp went to his own horse, gesturing for the others to follow suit, and hit the saddle. Riding out he was also conscious of the whittled down force behind him. Only eight men altogether, but some of them were worth several ordinary gun-toting cowpunchers. Take Cheyenne, Tiny, Pete and Kinny. Four tough fighters he could be certain of to stand their own against great odds.

Simp took them west, then a little to the south. They came to where great blocks of stone dotted the basin among the junipers. Simp halted, expecting to put up a watcher or two who could see well over the range. Before he issued orders Cheyenne called Tiny and Pete to him.

'Us three, boys,' he said. 'I reckon you don't need to be told how to do it.'

No more was said, the three hardcases drifting into the timber and from sight. Simp dismounted, leaving his horse free, and settled against the side of the big rock. The other riders followed unhurriedly, but showed a little tension. Chewing tobacco, Simp tried to pass the time without jumpy nerves. Patience was long exhausted in him. He wanted action. Just any kind to be doing something.

The sun climbed steadily in the sky and still the three hardcases stayed away. It meant they found nothing. They were experienced outlaws; knew how to make a prowling scout. On that score Simp did not fret, for if Judy entered the lower basin they would find them.

A little after ten o'clock Pete returned. He shook his head negatively while dismounting.

'They didn't cross the road east.'

Simp spat out a chewed cud of tobacco and bit off a fresh one. Fifteen minutes later the junipers broke apart as Tiny rode back from the west. He stepped from the saddle, approaching in a lumbering walk.

'Bunch of riders come east, about the centre of the basin,' he reported. 'I reckon it was them. Riding slow, like they was in no hurry.'

Unreasoning anger flared in Simp and his throat convulsed.

'Why the hell didn't you follow them up to see where they went?' he demanded.

Tiny's eyes hardened on the cowman fast, yet he did not make a fiery retort. Under the circumstances, having lost a home ranch along with his two brothers, some unreasonableness should be expected from him. Tiny relaxed and spoke casually.

'Cheyenne's found them long since,' he explained. 'Scouting with us is a pattern worked out years ago. Each takes an area and don't get into another. Liable to get shot without warning scouting along in the brush.'

Not replying, Simp relaxed against the rock, chewing steadily to hide his angered disturbance. However, they did not have much longer to wait. Cheyenne rode in, not dismounting. At once the others spread over to the main group. Cheyenne nodded his head from the side, no smile on his thick lips.

'About five miles away. They went into camp for a bit to eat and short rest, looks like. They're scattered in thick brush. Act like real guerrilla fighters. We'll have to be cute about this or we won't get many of them.'

Simp striding for his horse was the signal for all to mount. Cheyenne reined about into the timber. He led the way at a walk, meandering around between stands of juniper. But there was purpose in that, always it was under cover. Through no open spaces and their approach impossible of easy detection.

Having already studied the ground around Judy's temporary camp Cheyenne knew which side to attack from. It must be in very thick brush, going in finally by crawling. Which was why

he halted them well away, in a glade so distant no sound of stock betrayed them.

Simp was glad to leave the details in the hands of an experienced bushwhacker. Cheyenne gathered them close. Though plenty far enough away, he still spoke in a whispering voice. Describing Judy's situation he separated the crew into three bunches, one led by himself, then Tiny and Pete.

'Swing out from the sides of Tiny and Pete,' he instructed. 'Stay ten to twelve feet back, and do whatever they do. That way you'll get right in close enough to fix them cowboys before they can get started.'

It was a beautiful plan he worked out and nothing should have gone wrong with it. Cheyenne expected an easy ambush here, taking the centre of the line himself. Simp followed him, then Kinny. The rest were split on the flanks.

Not one noise from the unseen camp guided them. Nothing indicated men present except the absence of blue jays and other birds in the trees. Cheyenne was good at this kind of stalking, and moved true to the focus point. Fifty yards back he dropped to the ground to reconnoitre better beneath low brushy limbs. Sound moved against the ground too, and now they heard the faint noise of grazing horses.

Cheyenne saw something else, the booted feet of a cowboy retreating to the south. Since the man walked unhurriedly Cheyenne decided that he was not yet alarmed. Still, moving on another ten yards the hardcase returned to a prone position to survey the scene ahead.

Almost at once Cheyenne swore bitterly. He could see cowboys crawling fast on the ground away from where the camp was located. Each one carried a rifle, to throw lead through the brush more accurately. Even as he discovered this manoeuvre and came onto his feet, Cheyenne realised what happened. The man he saw going away before them earlier was one of several posted wide out. That precaution was taken after he surveyed Judy's camp.

'They found us some way,' Cheyenne snarled between his teeth. 'These waddies are wolves! Move in wide and dodge behind a rock or tree. They're shooting blind into the brush same as us, so don't get excited!'

He wheeled to run forward behind a juniper, crawled under the limbs and threw himself down on the other side of a narrow opening. As he did so a rifle coughed beyond, the bullet cutting the brush overhead.

Ensued a bare pause, hardly a breathing space, before the timber rocked to roaring concussions. Cheyenne emptied his sixgun and while reloading glanced left along the open space. Tiny was visible, kned down and firing steadily from behind a pile of boulders. But to the near side and behind him, one of the 3 B cowboys lay dead, face up in the shaft of sunlight.

Then he heard a moaning sound, Simp's curses between clenched teeth, and saw Latt Kinny on his side, blood gushing from his mouth.

The shooting simmered down a bit and Cheyenne said tersely, 'Move in on them!'

Gun reloaded he crawled under limbs, found another space and stretched out. Judy cowboys once close in were gone. They, or support farther back, fired systematically through the brush while the withdrawal continued. He had a terrible sensation then that they were against a master hand at brush fighting.

On the west Pete's charged voice rang on the air. 'Rush 'em! They're moving out!'

Cheyenne stomped to his feet, glancing aside to watch Simp with clenched jaws finish refilling his sixgun cylinder. Both then plunged recklessly through the junipers, aware of no more bullets whining at them.

16

JUST SHORT of dawn Ira checked Lamson's place, finding utter silence and peace everywhere. Crossing the creek he unsaddled and flung himself prone in the grass to sleep. So tired was he that when he awakened the sun stood half-way to the zenith. As he roused slowly it was to discover Lamson sitting on the ground across the glade, long barrelled rifle resting on his knees.

'Ruthie got worried when you didn't show for breakfast, so I come looking,' the old man said.

Ira stood to his feet, stretched, picked up his rifle and joined Lamson on the short walk to the creek. There he washed, going on to the house. Over the food Ruth saved for him he told about visiting Sophie Jaltz, and that as far as he had learned, nothing serious occurred in the basin. Of course he was unable to cover the western end during the few hours scouted.

The men sat smoking after Ira quit eating. Conversation lagged, until Lamson stalked to his feet, motioning at the cowboy to follow. He went only to the south end of the porch, pointing at the nearest big tree.

On the west side of it, reaching back to standing timber stood a windrow of freshly cut brush. Lamson viewing his work of the morning nodded his head in satisfaction.

'A short jump and a quick get away, should it be needed,' he allowed. He meant if they came under siege, something Ira hoped would not happen to them.

They went over to the barn, working in the stables and last at the saddle shed. They were there when Ruth appeared on the porch to summon them to another meal. Lamson started over first, Ira a few feet behind him came to a quick halt. West in the distant timber several gun shots echoed. A dim sound that barely carried.

Lamson swung about only because of Ira's tense listening

attitude. The shooting died away, only to rise a little higher before ending completely. Lamson said something and Ira set forth in a jog-trot for the house. He got there first, grabbing his rifle inside the kitchen, but the old man followed right behind him.

From near the stove Ruth broke out, 'Have we trouble to face again?' hollowly.

'Just something coming off we. t,' Ira replied. 'We'll see what it is.'

He kept going, jumped off the end of the porch and streaked for the timber on the north side of the wagon road. Reaching it he looked south in time to spot Lamson darting like a deer into cover. He disappeared completely, no sound of his running on the breeze. Ira went on, listening for a new outbreak of gunfire that did not materialise.

Coming to where the road bent southward, a scattering of timber to the west, he drew in behind a fallen log. Several times he fancied hearing riders far off. Yet none appeared, until after half an hour of impatient waiting they definitely approached from the north. A rattle raised briefly, dying away as the band slowed to a walk.

Ira kept straining his eyes, trying to spot them in the timber. However, they proved clever, hugging cover at all times. Especially against rear attack. Perhaps a couple of hundred yards away they halted, the stamp of horses' feet fighting flies plainly audible.

All this time there was no concrete evidence of Lamson. The old man was cunning, and since he stayed doggo Ira remained where he was. To him the movement of riders meant skirmishing in the brush. One party waylaying the other. Whoever the bunch near at hand, they laid a trap waiting for another to approach. Ira wished that he could determine their identity, yet obeyed the advantage of remaining hidden to strike unexpectedly.

But there was not much more delay. The riders got into motion, coming at an angle towards him. Out a hundred yards a break appeared which they were forced to cross to get nearer to the bend of the road.

When the first rider showed briefly Ira's breath sucked in

between his teeth. That man was Cheyenne, followed by Simp Buzzard, Tiny and some others. He could not see them plainly for at the last they crowded to get into some planned position. It indicated they knew other riders were coming in and set their bushwhack accordingly.

Because of an angle he held, Lamson must have seen them after the halt. Into the tree tops lashed the heavy boom of his old rifle. With it a man screamed shrilly in agony. While instant confusion arose Ira leaned against the big log, firing into the spot as fast as he could lever cartridges into the firing chamber of the rifle.

Two sixguns lashed back at them, yet at nothing definite the milling riders could see. For some reason it took several minutes for the bunch to extract themselves. Likely because of a badly wounded man. Ira kept throwing lead, and especially as they fled in a hard run across the narrow opening.

The hardcases' guns ceased on beginning flight, thundering hooves beating rapidly northward. In the aftermath of silence Ira crammed more shells into the magazine, watching straight west into a large V-shaped opening.

Presently two packed mules, swinging heads to the side, trotted into it. Behind them appeared the tight face of Pinky Norman. He held up, surveying the open spaces suspiciously. Then apparently satisfied no danger lurked before him, came on at a trot to overtake the mules. Riding slower behind him came three wounded cowboys, listless and dull in the saddle.

They gained a hundred feet or so before Steve Paulsen showed. Two cowboys were behind him, but when he reached the wide mouth of the opening four others came in from the sides, having manoeuvred as scouts to that point. Lamson revealed himself on the edge of the rutted road.

'Go on in!' he called to Judy, waving left hand in the air. 'We drove them off for a spell.'

Paulsen replied and put his band into faster speed. Ira let them by before passing through the timber to the premises. As he emerged the wounded were being put in the cabin. From the house came Ruth, now wearing a pink checkered gingham house dress, bringing hot water, medicine and clean cotton cloth bandages.

At the door Norman took the materials from her, and hesitating, she suggested the wounded could be put to bed in the house.

'Thanky, ma'm,' Norman replied tiredly. 'But we can take better care of them here.'

Most of Judy's crew assisted the ramrod, or stood outside the door. Ira walked in from the side to where Paulsen talked to Lamson, the saddled horses a little ways beyond. The cowboy faced him immediately, eyes running over Ira in quick inspection. The harsh lined face broke only slightly.

'I expect you're Caldwell,' he began. Next he held out his hand.

Ira shook, stepping back a pace.

'Just telling Lamson,' Paulsen went on, 'thanks for stopping that last bushwhack. Been that way since they chased us from a rest halt. We got two of them, though lost a man of my own.'

Several Judy cowboys moved past them for the horses, glancing at Ira curiously. When they picked up bridle reins to care for the stock he strode to the nearest.

'Let me borrow your bronk for a scout,' he said. 'Mine is hidden off the place.'

'Sure,' the cowboy replied, handing over bridle reins readily.

'They've got to lick their own wounds a spell,' Paulsen spoke up. 'Don't reason they followed us on in here.'

'Maybe not, but I'll make sure of it,' Ira answered, lifting into the saddle.

'Don't expect they'll be able to renew the fight before to-night, or maybe not until to-morrow,' Paulsen declared now. 'By that time maybe we'll have fresh help. Cut a man loose to race for Judy.'

Another cowboy mounted and trotted over to join Ira. 'I'll side you,' he announced crisply and did. They rode to the edge of the road, from where Ira guided into the northwest. After an hour scouting far out they circled to the creek, and returned to the barn to put the horses away.

Meanwhile the worn-out cowboys had eaten and gone to rest scattered about the place. Ira and the Judy cowboy arrived at the kitchen to find only Paulsen with the Lamsons. He sat

at the table in talk with the old man, lifting an inquiring glance at Ira.

'All clear?'

'Yeah, but we'd better make a scout every hour anyhow.'

Ruth set places for them at the table, and Ira sat down with the Judy cowboy to eat.

After considering him a moment Paulsen said, 'We finished off Ewel Buzzard at the 3 B. Burned everything there to the ground. Deke escaped badly wounded, and he wasn't with Simp and his bunch when they struck us in the basin.'

Pausing his eating Ira appraised the cowman speculatively.

'You're into this for keeps, then?'

'Are we?' Paulsen appeared like he wanted to laugh derisively but was too tired. 'You called it exactly on the Buzzard brothers. They're behind the rustling. Worst of all, they're the boss thieves!'

'You've got enough help coming to finish it off?'

'I should have,' Paulsen replied. 'All from Judy. Told my puncher not to even stop in town. Don't want no news of this thief roundup to leak out until I finish them off. It's the best way. No wild rumours circulating to cause alarm.'

'Yeah. No doubt about the Buzzard brothers being all of what we think?'

That time Paulsen did laugh short. 'Haw, haw! One of them we strung up, found with them rebranded steers, he confessed to it. Wanted to be sure we knowed the Buzzard brothers was ramrodding the thefts!'

That should settle any questions arising in the future. Ira went back to eating, listening abstractedly to the cowman go on telling Lamson what Judy accomplished so far. In his mind there remained no doubt of the immediate end of the 3 B outfit. They were thieves and they must go. One more good fight, knocking off the leaders, and the rest would flee for their lives. At least Paulsen delivered that theory in fullest conviction.

But Ira did other reasoning, knowing how long it would require for reinforcements to arrive from Judy. From what the cowman himself said, that would not be many men either. So Ira deducted the wounded cowboys in the cabin, out of all fighting except a close, last ditch stand and realised with a

shock that with Paulsen remained only seven able-bodied men. Cheyenne, Tiny, and Pete could make them enough trouble. The balance of Simp Buzzard's crew could practically wipe them out. But only if Simp realised something of their few numbers and followed with an immediate attack. When he left the table Ira went to the door.

'I don't like the way this shapes up,' he said directly at Paulsen. 'It's mighty dangerous. Simp Buzzard has three men, the hardcases I saw while ago still manoeuvring to shoot into you again. They get smart and work the same deal on us I did them, you'll lose men every time they stick heads from cover. This place is made for bushwhacking!'

Paulsen frowned, opened his mouth to object and closing it, stared questioningly at Lamson.

'He ought to savvy,' the old man averred solemnly. 'He sure used a rifle on them to good account. Dropped culprits all over the place. Spooked them rascals so much they was afraid to show their faces in the open day or night.'

The cowman shifted attention again to Ira.

'What do you aim to do about it?'

'Scout the timber, and keep at it. We find their sign we'll know quick they're in. Maybe in time to do something about it before they charge in shooting.'

'You'll need some help,' Paulsen inclined his head in agreement that the strategy was good. 'Since all my boys are worn to a frazzle, I'll join you.'

As he stood to his feet Lamson bounced upward.

'You grab some rest,' he said brusquely, and to Ira, 'I'll take the south woods. Hope to scare me up some varmints before sundown!'

Not taking risks, even if he did not believe the 3 B hardcases were near yet, Ira entered the timber directly from the porch end. From there all the way around to the northwest. He favoured that point, and towards the creek for skulkers to snoop at them. When they did evidence should not be difficult to find immediately.

Roving periodically back and forth across the danger area, the hot afternoon waned. Then the dusk, a bad time for raiders to sneak in. Ira viewed it with cold suspicion and went

on the alert more than before. Yet night fell, stars shining in the sky, and nothing untowards happened.

It was later when Ira passed through the barn from the back. At the front in the shadows stood Norman and a Judy cowboy.

'You finally showed, eh?' the ramrod began amiably. 'We been waiting to take over your spot. But the boss warned we'd better be damned sure you come in first, or your itchy trigger finger would curve on a shooting iron!'

Ira explained and described the surroundings where a man should be on guard. Then he walked on to the house, entering to find Paulsen and Lamson discussing cattle raising in the basin. Ruth was not present, but food waited on the table for him.

Ira drank the coffee first and as he replaced cup on saucer, the dog suddenly set up frenzied barking on the creek. The cowboy came onto his feet, gaze riveting to Lamson.

'Where's Ruth?'

'Dag-gone dog!' Lamson exclaimed. 'Must of flushed some wild critter on the creek.'

The barking increased in excited volume, and then ended in a sharp yelp of pain. Ira's face constricted by that time as cold fear rushed through him.

'Ruth?' he demanded again, fearful because the dog always accompanied her to the creek for water.

They all realised what the dog's yelp meant, that somebody struck it with a stone to shut off the furious barking.

'Ruth went out with the water buckets just before you showed,' Lamson answered heavily, rising from his chair. 'Said she wanted a breath of fresh air, not exactly needing water to-night.'

'They've got her!' Ira exclaimed harshly. From where he stood he saw the dog limping in on an injured forefoot.

Paulsen exclaimed, 'Hunh. Is that possible?'

'Get the light,' Lamson husked out in alarm. 'Blow it out and I'll take a run down there.'

'No, leave the lamp burning.' Ira stopped Paulsen from extinguishing one of them. 'Let it alone and they won't savvy we're wise. I'll go 'after them!'

The rifle now would impede rapid movement, and besides at close quarters he wouldn't need it. Ira left it there, sliding small around the door facing to the end of the porch. One jump and he was off, darting behind the red-barked pine tree. No shot greeted him, and he wondered if maybe Ruth fell into hands of advance scouts. After all, he might have guessed wrong. They could approach from east of the creek just as well.

Anxious as to her safety he skulked quickly to the woods' road, crossed it into a place from which he could view the creek bank where she always got water. The wooden buckets lay on the sides next to the footpath, as if dropped there when she started back carrying them full. The gray granite rock stood beyond, and over the spot glistened the starlight, revealing only the immobile boulders and trees.

Since he must move always on the alert through the deepest shadows it took Ira a good ten minutes to get around to the big rock. From its safety he could see into the path. The ground was scuffed and marked as it would be in a struggle after they pounced at her from hiding.

The sign pointed at the creek bank, ending in a black strip. Chancing it, believing now they grabbed Ruth and sped away at once, he went to the edge of the creek. There he crawled over the gravel, over the path and into the creek timber again. He grew certain they passed upstream rather than over it. The escape route was a break for him, and Ira raised upward against protection of a tree to reconnoitre before setting forth stalking. Cold rage blazed in him, and he feared daylight must come before he could trace the culprits down.

'AFTER IRA left the house Lamson exhibited acute signs of apprehension. He got his rifle, edging sideways to stare into the night from the door.

Paulsen said gravely, 'Sit down. 'If they dared grab Miss Ruth, remember Judy's got some men hiding out there. They can't get away with it. They would not dare harm a woman anyhow. Maybe they'll try to dicker with us, if Caldwell don't bust right in and shoot the whole batch of them.'

Lamson resumed his chair, yet remained taut, ready to break and run to any point where he might be able to fight. Meantime the best they could do was wait until Ira reported on the circumstances. It never occurred to either of them he might go it alone.

'That Caldwell now,' Paulsen began, 'quite a man. Scrapper ever inch of him.'

Lamson nodded his tousled head, slitted eyes staring at the cowman until the intelligence of his words occurred fully.

'The boy is an experienced cowman,' he replied dully. 'What's more, smart as a whip. When he came here wounded, it only took him two-three days to get wise to them three hardcases supposed to be helping me out. He got onto them that quick, when it took me weeks and weeks to learn what tricks they was really up to.'

He paused to listen into the night. Paulsen inclined his head. His judgment of the cowboy was borne out by what he heard.

'Cheyenne Roden and his two partners, waⁿ up to no good, hey?'

'Plenty so,' Lamson sighed wearily. 'I was fooled the longest because I always like to believe in the goodness of human nature.'

'The Buzzard brothers' hirelings all the time?'

Lamson's eyes regarded him with a brightening expression.

'Shucks, they was rustlers. Worked from here to Indian Flats. They was part of the thieves' set-up there. Then they had a neater one yet, which they don't savvy we're wise to.'

Lamson produced his cob pipe to fill with tobacco. Paulsen waited on him patiently, sensing that he was to learn more of the rustler operation.

'What was their other scheme?' he asked finally, after Lamson lighted his pipe and it did not appear that he would go on.

'Purty smart, and their rebrands was so perfect we wasn't plumb positive who owned them cows until we peeled a hide off to read from the other side, as Caldwell says. This here deal now, was to load my place with plenty of them same stolen cows. That's how come the Buzzard brothers *had* to take it away from me. Had to get legal control of my Windowsash DL iron after they'd started building up a herd of breeding stock in the timber around me. Danged pesky varmints!' he ended indignantly.

Paulsen sat still, freezing fast, his eyes beginning to glint. His wild wrath for all thieves swelled his veins.

'Sounds interesting,' he ground between his teeth. 'So they built up this herd in your iron? That was likely them hardcases' main purpose in being here hiding out with you?'

'Tolerably,' Lamson replied in an easy manner. Removing the pipe from his mouth he expelled smoke. 'Make a mite of trouble for us. Howsomever, I know how many breeding cows I own. What the increase amounts to. Of course they didn't aim for me to be around alive to pick my own critters from a roundup.'

'So you and Caldwell jerked a hide and looked on the other side?'

'Yeah, mighty clever rebrand it was, when he couldn't be sure. Now, no need to get your dander on the prod. You're mighty lucky it was my brand they run your young cows into. Mighty fine looking critters. Wisht I could afford to buy them offa you.'

'At least you get them back. For all we gotta do is vent the new burns and run your Cross P onto them. What I mean by saying they cause us a mite of work.'

The old man's casual manner, his well being, calmed Paulsen from exploding. Here was a case where he could have gone off the deep end in his hatred for thieves. But he knew this honest old man told him the gospel truth, that he was not and never could be a rustler on his own account. The cowman relaxed, and actually grinned.

'I'll be damned!' he exclaimed. 'They was sure working the ends against the middle.'

'Wasn't they, though?' He halted to frown. 'Seems like Caldwell is taking a lot of time finding out what happened to my Ruthie.'

'I hope nothing did. Uh, how many of them cows did they burn into your Windowsash DL?'

'Don't rightly know until we roust them out of the brush between here and Injun Flats. So far I calkilate between two hundred fifty and three hundred head.'

Paulsen started, and laughed jerkily. He surmised the theft might really reach five hundred. He started to say as much and stopped abruptly, sliding onto his feet, head cocked sideways. Next he eased warily to the door, a moment later speaking from the side of his mouth.

'Somebody coming but it's from the wrong direction to be Caldwell and Miss Ruth.'

'Dad-gummed varmints! Guess I'll have to go into the woods and skin them alive for molesting Ruthie.'

Paulsen returned to the table fast, resuming his seat. His gray face reverted to the harsh lines of violent determination once more.

'I heard Pinky talking to somebody. Seems like he's fetching a man here.'

Lamson blinked his eyes, and withdrew the pipe from between his teeth. By then they heard steps on the porch, and Norman soon framed in the doorway, a shadowy shape behind him.

'Boss, Simp Buzzard rode off the road alone, plumb peaceful,' the ramrod began talking fast. 'Said he wanted a flag of truce to come talk to you. I brought him on.'

Paulsen inclined his head, saying nothing, and Norman removed himself from the door to let Simp Buzzard enter.

But he came in behind him, going left as Simp shifted along the wall to the right of the door

For a few moments Simp's iron-like countenance did not relax. His narrowed eyes burned on Paulsen in pure hate, and Lamson in lesser degree. He held himself stiffly, the long barrelled sixgun hanging low on his leg. Simp had a lot of nerve coming here, and he knew it better than they did. There was purpose in the move, however. Probably several reasons that would pan out if whatever his plan in mind failed. Paulsen grew restless first.

'Speak your piece, and let's get back to fighting,' he told him bluntly. 'I got little patience with any kinda thieves!'

Simp's lips cracked apart and he spat the words like a buzzing rattlesnake.

'Who's got any right to call me a cow thief, Paulsen?'

'Don't beat around the stump. Get your say over with and beat it!'

'I came to find out what the hell's your idea in making war on me. You struck unfairly, and foully. So right off I see you're using a lie to justify in folks' minds why you came raiding, killing and burning!'

'I'll clean out all the rustlers been preying on me for three years!' Paulsen reared back to yell at him right in the room. 'Who they turn out to be don't cut no ice with me.'

'It'll be a pleasure to finish off you and your whole gang of murdering cowboys,' Simp retorted in clipped speech. 'For burning my outfit, *murdering* my brothers I'm going to see you shot dead, or hanged if I can get you alive, Paulsen!'

'Haw, haw! Hurry up, cow thief, and let's get back to finding out how you make out.'

'With pleasure!'

But Simp did not leave at once. In fact his voice dropped to to an ordinary conversational tone though somewhat steely. He said that he came in against his better judgment. Only to find out for himself on what trumped up excuse Judy raided the basin. He claimed that he could think of no reason on earth. It came as a complete surprise to 3 B that Judy jumped on them.

Paulsen listened to him deliver a rather persuasive defence

that he was cognisant of nothing to warrant such attack, and that the 3 B had never done Judy any harm.

'Except you've always swore everybody in the basin was a rustler,' he concluded. 'Now you're using that as an excuse against me. So you're going to find out you won't get away with it!'

'No?' Paulsen chuckled mirthlessly at him. 'Some of your uncles we hanged spilled the whole works. Think I can't go into court and prove you Buzzard brothers wasn't the ramrod rustlers? I can and more, with the cattle that was rebranded from Cross P.'

Simp regarded him levelly a moment. Then he actually seemed to nod his head.

'I'd found some of them freshly branded 3 B steers a few days ago,' he said. 'Got to wondering why. Too many to have needed working over. Then I find this Indian Flats set-up. Strictly a rustler camp. But why'd they use my iron?'

'I dunno, except maybe to account for stolen cattle being in the basin, using a forged bill of sale on 3 B later when they drove out and sold. Only way it makes sense to me. So I get this rustler trouble on my hands and I'm busy putting them out of business, while you jump on me from behind. I'd never expected that. At least play fair. For you know damned well 3 B wasn't doing any stealing from Judy!'

'Don't make no difference arguing about it now,' Paulsen informed him flatly. 'I know better, that you Buzzard brothers was stealing me blind. So be it. I'm going to give you the just reward got coming to any cow thief.'

By then one purpose of Simp's visit was obvious. To instil enough doubt in Paulsen to cause him to call a halt in the fighting. Then talk himself out of the hole and the charges made. But Paulsen was having none of that, believing his course the only just and right one. Simp's frigid expression roved over him anew.

'Seems like I got what I came for,' he spoke tersely. 'You're going to eat them words in hell as fast as I can bring it about. There ain't no stopping this now until I get vengeance for the murder of my brothers. For destruction of my ranch I'll get judgment for damages on your estate.'

'Big talk!' Paulsen snapped. 'We saw rustlers in your crew each time they tried to ambush us to-day. *Known* outlaws!'

'Why, yes, I allow.' Simp gave him a triumphant gleam from hate-filled eyes. 'You knocked off or run my crew out of the basin. Next, for all I know the three you hung was rustlers, and the ones who done them rebrands. But you missed one hell of a lot of hardcases hidin' out in the basin over here plumb off 3 B range. They was mighty handy, and in my need I *hire*! them at gun hands' wages. That's how come you're going to get yours before another dawn, Steve Paulsen, you no good——!'

'I've heard enough and took enough from you,' Paulsen warned.

'Your cussed tracks ain't so big now, be they?' Simp sneered. 'None of them steers, none of the thieves have been found on or have hidden out in 3 B range. How you gonna explain that as excuse for burning and killing? You can't. I could ride out, go to law, and you'd be in one hell of a fix. But I'm not waiting so long to have your blood the slow way!'

'Get on your way because your whining makes me sick to my stummick. If you wanta live much longer you'd better run!'

'Yeah?' harshly. 'Speaking of thieves, which you claim to dislike so bad. Better take a look-see along this creek range. We've seen some mighty queer brands on too many cows Dave Lamson is supposed to own. Three of them rustlers hid out here, and worked for him. They've got quite a yarn to tell of how they operated all through this end of the basin!'

'Come up with something worth listening to. That scheme is part of the evidence against you. Lamson wasn't fooled. We know all about them Cross P cows made into Windowsash DL. Which is only more evidence against you. If you came thinking to make some kind of a deal, you ain't. The whole damned country isn't big enough to hide you now!'

He waited after that, watching Simp intently. Only the man's blind hatred showed on him at all. Two attempts to drive an opening wedge failed. The cowman half expected to hear then that they captured Ruth Lamson on the creek. As a windup Simp might spring that on them in order to dicker. In that

case Paulsen felt weak, for he could not force himself to endanger her life and knew it.

However, Simp Buzzard did not mention the girl at all. His frozen countenance shifted to Norman as he started for the door.

'You don't need to see me off the place,' he announced bluntly. 'I can find my way out.'

Norman remained in the kitchen, listening as they did to Simp's retreating steps on the porch. Then they heard him leave with a clatter of galloping hooves. Paulsen sprang to his feet and blew out one lamp while Lamson extinguished the other on the wall.

From the darkness of the table Paulsen gritted, 'Pinky, we think them rascals must of kidnapped Miss Ruth off the creek when she went for water to-night. Long time ago Caldwell struck out to see. He hasn't come back yet.'

'No,' Judy's ramrod cried, aghast. 'They don't dast harm her?'

'I wouldn't think so, but she could get hurt other ways. If they took her, peculiar Simp didn't force a deal on us.'

'Boss, what'll we do about Miss Ruth?'

'Nothing to-night. Can't track, besides maybe Caldwell will know something. Better string more of the boys 'way outside. They can close in behind them better than fight them off.'

'I figger Simp Buzzard was bragging too much,' Norman opined. 'Betcha he ain't got as many men as he let on to.'

'While that's probably true, he's got some real experienced killers along. Hmm,' he frowned, 'I betcha the main reason he came in was to find out how many of Judy's men are here. Yeah,' he sounded convinced of it, 'that's the how of it and one way or the other he's going to make up his mind about having it out to-night!'

'Boss, he come in from the west. Riding in the open to the bend of the road. Nobody else near him or I'd have heard them. Fact is, I levelled my gun on him in the starlight and come danged near blowing him out of his saddle!'

Realising that would have ended the fighting Paulsen replied

stonily, 'Well, how did your trigger finger come to get paralysed?'

'Struck me just about what the deal was. How'd I know but what he wanted to call it quits and give up?'

'It's all right, Pinky,' the cowman assured him. 'It's cut and dried anyway. Nothing we can do about it. If he's got enough men he'll come charging. If not he'll go away. Thing is,' he sounded concerned, 'wisht we knewed Miss Ruth was safe before the real ruckus commences.'

Lamson walked from his chair to the front wall, taking down his long rifle. He was still bareheaded, and seldom wore a hat even at work. Paulsen eyed him curiously a moment.

'Ain't you gonna stick around with me to shoot from here while the boys take them from behind?'

'I'm going into the woods,' Lamson told him. 'Ruthie's out there somers. They didn't take her far. Before morning I'll smell out them scamps' den. Right after that you won't have so many two-legged varmints to bother with.'

While he stowed extra ammunition in his pockets Norman's stare broke from Paulsen's face. The ramrod turned out of the kitchen on his way to take the extra precautions. Himself and two men were all that was left to bolster the lines. The rest were out there already, and yet as close as they certainly were watching, no alarm came from them. To Judy's ramrod that indicated Simp had not yet moved his force near enough to plunge through at the ranch in a sudden shooting foray.

Paulsen watched Lamson pass wordless from the kitchen. The old man walked noiselessly like an Indian or a frontier woodsman, with his feet in a straight line, toes tucked inward. The cowman arose behind him, stealing to the window to watch him whisk swiftly from all sight past the big pine tree.

He went back to the chair at the table, and while thinking kept his ears tuned for the first alarm to raise when Simp Buzzard moved against the place. The importance of Simp's venomous hate occurred to him, and it gave Paulsen an uneasy feeling that all was hardly as well as it seemed.

In a way he hoped that Simp concluded that the Judy men were few in number and could be taken. If he did not, what he might do in revenge sent a jolt like lightning through the

cowman, Simp had accused Judy of hitting treacherously behind his back. He roiled with that, when the Buzzard brothers knew they were liable to be denounced any time for their crookedness. Simp's expressed anger over the accusation formed a pattern now. Suppose Simp took a leaf from the fight already, and struck where Paulsen wasn't looking? Judy lay wide open to a crushing blow. The few men left at home would be on their way soon, leaving the ranch absolutely helpless for destruction.

Muttering dark words Paulsen arose to pace the floor in measured tread, listening for an outbreak of gunfire, and fearing that he would not hear it this night.

IRA ALSO did not believe they took Ruth very far from where she was kidnapped. It wasn't reasonable they went far up the creek either. Being unable to track, he resorted to the only means of search possible. Slow quartering through the timber. He used a pattern of zig-zag lines, from proximity to the stream westward.

Gradually his hunt extended southward and it must have been an hour later before he found the horses. Saddled stock in a glade against the south bend of the wagon road from Lamson's place. Immediately he hugged the ground, trying to pick up other sound. It did not come. The hardcases, actually close to him were as quiet as mice. Aware of immediate discovery he progressed only a few feet at a time around the side of the road.

They were under some close-set trees, an unperceivable number of men lying on the ground in the deepest shadows. A hundred feet beyond the horses and doing no talking or moving around. Ira crawled in the grass behind the bole of a tree, able to peer into a space where several dark forms lay. As the minutes dragged on he managed to determine some objects. One was a slender form alone under the low limbs of a jackpine. By the lighter colour of the clothing he concluded that it had to be Ruth.

Immediately his pulse jumped and a few moments he fought himself from leaping in on them with a flaming gun. That wouldn't do. There should be a more sensible way to effect her rescue. As he tried to conceive a sure plan a rider raised on the road. Only then did any of them stir, a couple to make certain of that rider's identity.

Simp Buzzard rode up to them, sitting his saddle in the starlight where Ira identified him definitely. It was Cheyenne who spoke first, however.

'We scouted on the creek while you been gone. Ran into Lamson's girl and cotched her.'

'The hell you did!'

'Yeah, won't she be a bargaining price with old Lamson?'

Simp considered that idea, and yet did not appear overly interested.

'Where you got her?' he wanted to know. 'Wisht I'd knowed it when I went in there. Ain't going back again.'

'Tied up good, and gagged,' Cheyenne replied.

'Think she could get loose on her own account?'

'Hell no!'

'Then let her lie there and rot to death!' Simp exploded angrily. 'I wanta sec Paulsen laid out stiff!'

'How many of them are there? We'll rub out Judy and Lamson will have to make a deal.'

'I couldn't find out. Quite a bunch, seems as though. At least they got enough men to put out on watch. I ran into Pinky Norman at the turn of the road. Damn near shot me, and I had him covered all the time, which he didn't know.'

Cheyenne thought it over, bothered by the supposition there were too many Judy cowboys for them to handle.

'What we do next?' he asked. 'Gonna be real expensive to go in for them?'

'Too much so, and bad as I'd like to kill Paulsen to-night.' Simp paused there, going into a string of low oaths afterwards. It was the first break he made before the hardcases, his hate of Paulsen alive and raw.

'Time's getting on,' Cheyenne reminded when he finally stopped.

Ignoring that Simp said, 'We can't afford to get nobody else killed. Short handed as it is. So I got to postpone getting Paulsen to-night. But we can hit him right where he'll squall for calf rope in a hurry.'

'Tell you what, we'll spread and drive his pickets in. Jumped, they'll streak for the buildings. That done, make them think they're under siege for the rest of the night, we'll pull out and ride direct to Judy. I wanta watch that place going up in smoke. Betcha it will be a purty blaze. Make me damned near as happy as shooting him dead!'

Attacking Lamson's place full scale was a move none of them contemplated with any degree of favour. It would be bloody and they already had wounded along. Since this digression, an apparently easy piece of meanness to injure Judy, was better for them, men sprang off the ground. The wounded moved with less despatch but they all scurried through the timber to the horses. Simp Buzard followed part way for a final talk with Cheyenne as to how well they secured Ruth. Satisfied on the score he led the way into the roadbed. After a brief parley there the sound of riders spread wide apart moved off into the woods.

Ira's knife was open before he reached Ruth in a rush. He cut her wrists and ankles free, pulling the piece of cloth used as a gag from her mouth.

'Ira!' she breathed as he lifted her upright, running with her weight in his arms east until well away from the danger zone. There he stood Ruth on her feet against a screen of brush. When she started talking he stopped her.

'Honey, you heard what was said so you know what they're up to?'

'Yes?'

'This is it. While they're making their false move you hide in the brush. When it ends you get to the house and tell Paulsen they're riding to raid Judy.'

'What are you going to do?' she asked doubtfully.

'The only thing possible. Cross the creek, get my horse and light out for Judy. Hope to meet Paulsen's other cowboys on the road, and maybe get them back there. The thing to do is this. Get in as soon as you can after the 3 B pulls out. Paulsen can mount his uninjured men and come running.'

'I can do it!' she exclaimed feelingly. 'But be careful, will you?'

The guns awoke in the timber then, scattered far about Lamson's place. Most of it was sheer noise, yet designed to force in the cowboys outside on guard. And that appeared to be happening at once, for the sporadic shooting gradually shifted towards the buildings.

It caused Ira to move in a hurry. Soon they would be withdrawing according to plan and he must be racing ahead of

them. Holding to Ruth's hand he led her on an angle to the northeast, selecting a spot on the seldom used woods' road where she could hide.

Before they got to it a form stirred out of the blackness next to a tree. Ira stepped aside fast, his gun leaping from the holster before hearing Lamson speak sharply.

'Hold on, son! It's me.'

- 'Father!' Ruth exclaimed, running to him.

Releasing his weapon into leather, Ira walked over, listening to the gunfire. Some of it came from the ranch now, so the guards were nearly all forced to the premises.

'I see you got Ruth back,' Lamson said in an emotion husky voice.

'No time to talk,' Ira announced quickly. 'You get Ruth to Paulsen as fast as you can behind their retreat. I've got to be on my way, or Paulsen is out a good ranch he'll have to rebuild!'

He broke into a run through the forest, safe in doing so since he was so far from the nearest 3 B men. He crossed the creek via some rocks, throwing his saddle on the dun in record time. Mounted, he rode upstream at a gallop, hearing hardly any guns going to the north.

Below the several forks of the stream he returned to the west side, plunging into a run for the main basin road. He must follow it over the rim, because that route was the shortest to Shoeton. It would be all right, not risky provided he gained enough of a lead. No echo of gunfire at all now sent him into a little more speed, though he felt confident of getting away before them.

Passing a great block of stone he entered the less broken timbered area. In another ten minutes he hit the road, curving into it. The rim composed a dark line against the twinkling sky. In the more open country he looked often over one shoulder to the rear.

No riders showed behind and he arrived where the road sloped upward through the rim. On top of the plateau Ira reconnoitred, able to see far down the basin road and it remained empty.

Travelling on at a trot he gave the dun a chance to blow, but with second wind took off in another run. The plateau stretched

endless in three directions, and when he rounded a timbered bend the glow of lights in the town marred the sky. Still a lot of miles away. Ira pulled his horse down, changing to a steady going pace.

Because he was against the timber on the east side of the road the approaching riders did not spot him first. Ira saw them top a low rise, though he was aware of them before they heaved into sight. At once he reined off partly into the timber.

If they were Judy's men they were likely to be edgy and expecting trouble. The group dissolved into five riders, one a few yards in the lead on a lathered horse. It did not seem possible they could be Judy men. Surely the cowboy dispatched for help could not have reached there and got this far on the way back.

They might even be reinforcements for Simp Buzzard, a question Ira must decide in a matter of seconds. The five were now in full gallop towards him, closing separating distance fast.

He chose to risk it then, riding out sideways, his right arm in the air in a signal of peace.

The bunch slowed as he expected, but hands rested on gun handles. The four behind gained on the leader, a stringy individual humped over in his saddle. Before he came up Ira called out, 'I'm Caldwell.'

The name appeared to mean something to the leading rider. His gun hand came forward to rest on the saddle horn while halting.

'Talk fast. I'm Judy's strawboss, Clem Highley.'

'What, you the one Paulsen sent for help to Judy? Impossible, you couldn't make this kind of time!'

'If you know what I'm about then you must be Caldwell for certain. Nope, I didn't have to go all the way home. Found the boys had been to town, trying to learn what happened to the rest of us. Caught them on the road home and turned back without stopping. What gives?'

'Everybody pull off the road,' Ira replied, glancing anxiously towards the distant basin rim. 'They may be coming lickety-split right now. Get into the timber so we can talk.'

Highley moved them where Ira rode and they drew up inside the junipers in a ring. As rapidly as possible, pausing

occasionally to listen for hoof beats on the hard road, he told them of Simp Buzzard's plan to burn Judy in retaliation for destruction of 3 B.

'Dang it!' Highley exclaimed. 'Ain't enough of us to stop them, or prevent them from taking Judy. No one there except the cook and Missus Paulsen with the two small boys!'

'Like I told you, the Lamsons will give the bad news to Paulsen as fast as 3 B gets out of the way. The rest of your outfit will be chasing close after Simp Buzzard.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Highley muttered.

'Dammit!' came from a cowboy behind the strawboss. 'How come we need to keep quiet about them rustlers? Seems to me if we'd stopped in town and got some friends to come along we could wind up the 3 B right here on this road!'

'You savvy why,' Highley retorted doggedly. 'You know the boss when he gives orders. Wants them carried out exactly as he says.'

Determining the best strategy was fraught with extreme danger. A decision the cowboys were afraid to make lest it be the wrong one. They did not argue about it, only set about discussing the matter pessimistically. Ira grew impatient at once.

'Lookit, if they didn't leave soon after I did it's possible we can reach the basin rim before they do. In which case we might throw enough lead from the rocks to head them back the other way.'

'What if they pass around us?' Highley asked worriedly, visioning that as a terrible mistake on their part.

'Stay in the timber and go for the rim,' Ira suggested. 'If they come over before we get there we're still in a good enough ambush position!'

That would be it, bullet for bullet, carrying on Paulsen's direct method of fighting. Ira struck off first, but Highley soon raced in beside him. The others stayed close behind. The last stretch of the way lay entirely in the open. When they broke into it, the basin rim knife edged ahead, Ira slowed. Drumming hooves would echo over to any riders who might be ascending at a walk

But for all his concern about it, Ira found it needless. Simp

Buzzard had not hurried his men away from Lamson's place after all. For when Ira dismounted away from the rim to run over into the cap rocks, one look revealed the main basin road empty of riders. Nor did any approach from the open sides either.

On both sides of the road through the rim spread Judy cowboys. Highley remained with Ira, who constantly watched the darker plots of timber. The 3 B had no reason for concealment as far as they knew and should be coming on the run if Simp intended to attack undefended Judy.

Only a few minutes elapsed before Highley became unduly apprehensive. In a shaky voice he gasped fiercely, 'They went around us. Likely never come down the road at all!'

'Why should they go far out of their way?' Ira wanted to know in an effort to quiet him. 'The main road to Shoeton is the shortest. They don't savvy we're laying for them on it!'

'Why, uh, you're perzactly right,' Highley breathed freer. After that he calmed somewhat, scrutinising the basin constantly.

He helped hang the rustlers caught with the steers, and told about Arch Quinn's last words.

'We put them steers onto the plateau, and danged if I didn't find them high tailing it half-way to town,' he said. 'Like they was heading for home range without stopping.'

'Maybe they don't like the coarse grass in the basin,' Ira told him dryly.

He saw them a minute later, a moving blot separating from close standing trees on the sides of the road. For a moment he failed to realise that it was riders, until the two in the forefront dissolved into Simp Buzzard and Cheyenne Roden. Ira's low hiss of warning brought silence in the cap rock.

The 3 B was apparently in no wild rush. However, they did approach at a fast trot.

'Act like they got all the time they'd ever need,' Highley averred. 'All night long to ride to Judy in, and I reckon they have. Hit there just before daylight if we can't stop them here!'

Ira thought of something else. Unless the 3 B speeded up they were liable to be caught by Paulsen from the rear anyway. It didn't seem like they could do much damage to Judy now.

While he observed them grow plainer in the starlight the band lifted into a spurt of speed. The beat of galloping hooves dimmed on the air. Yet only for a short distance. Back from the talus of the ascent Cheyenne and Simp Buzzard reined up so suddenly those behind were forced to swing out to avoid a collision.

The quick stop was for another reason than the climb upward. Hatted heads were thrown back, faces bent at the rim of the plateau. Something was out of place on it. The presence of men hiding in ambush was discovered. To one side Highley muttered darkly before his words came coherently.

'One of the boys—damn him!—stuck his neck out too far and they seen him. Wait'll I find out who!' He kept his head down meanwhile, watching the riders below intently.

Ira checked along the rim. Not even from where he sat was a single Judy cowboy visible. As he turned his head more, the give-away on them proved obvious. Three of the saddled horses had grazed in after them. So near to the rim they could be seen against the stars from below. It was the horses that pointed conclusively to men lurking in the cap rock to open sudden attack.

The taut tableaux in the basin lasted a full two minutes before any movement occurred. Simp Buzzard reined left, his men swinging off with him slowly. They were not going to tackle the climb out in the face of guns but try it elsewhere.

Disgusted and disappointed over their bad luck, Judy cowboys raised to firing position and cut loose at the 3 B even if the distance was too far. Their rage was dissipated in futile firing. On his feet, Ira walked from the rim to his horse.

19

IRA RODE for the cut over the rim and when Highley trotted up they took the descent together. He retained a mental picture of the exact spot where the 3 B crew disappeared, taking the lead there instinctively.

A measure of bitterness held Ira now. The bad streak of luck here only accentuated the fact everything seemed to have gone wrong the past day and to-night. One such day filled with adverse luck, when nothing ended right for him, happened when he turned fifteen. On the Brazos river in Texas. He was breaking a pinto horse, and that particular morning when he saddled up and the pinto went to bucking, the cinch broke. Ira went off with the saddle, the pinto running free.

Shaken by the spill Ira repaired the cinch, took another horse and recaptured the pinto. His father stood by while he saddled again, saying he would likely walk home if he rode the pinto out. But nothing stopped Ira from trying it. He left the ranch in a run, letting the pinto have its head until miles lay behind. In the river timber he dismounted to give the pinto a blow. Appearing perfectly docile, with the vinegar busted out of him, the pinto stood for being petted and rubbed down.

Finally Ira looked at the high sun, tightened the cinch and lifted into the saddle. The pinto took two swift jumps and tossed Ira and saddle over his head again, wheeling sideways to run away. The pinto was gone and when Ira regained his senses from contact with hard ground, he shouldered the saddle and hoofed the long way home. He got there long after dusk and the Comanches had been there during the morning. The small ranch was ashes and his family was no more.

That tragic day when everything went wrong became a turning point in his life. He struck on to deeper west. Now this day was a bad one too, and recollecting it all for the first time in years a shudder passed through his body. Ira was not

superstitious, but not much more of this could go on without a terrible ending.

They reached the spot where the 3 B was last seen. Ira unobtrusively took actual command of the party. It was he who dismounted to trace out the running horses east towards the distant creek. Then he hit the saddle again and by reasoning correctly and inspecting the few open places, they managed to hang onto the 3 B outfit a little longer.

At first their direction of flight indicated a run-around opposition to the plateau rim. But it shifted, swinging all the way about to the north. Only then did Ira quit glancing at the rim more often than close to hand. The 3 B turned back after having slowed down, and the reason could be abandonment of the intended strike at Judy. That was indeed an audacious undertaking because of the long ride necessary to get there.

Next, all evidence of them was lost in the shadow-filled junipers. Nowhere echoed a sound of other riders. Nothing whatever off the road, and Paulsen should have been along before now.

The cowboys split up with instructions to ride out only a short circle before collecting at the side of the main road. This manoeuvre failed and with it any real hope they might pick up the 3 B again. Inspection of the road showed there had been no large body of riders over it.

'Might as well ride to meet the boss,' Highley allowed. 'Get him and turn around for home. No telling where these rascals struck for?'

'None,' Ira agreed woodenly.

They moved in pairs along the road at a walk, hooves making plopping sounds in the sand and dust. Ira, on Highley's right in the lead, smelled the tang of that dust in his nose, and always kept gaze ahead on the alert for junction with Paulsen coming out could be sudden. Before them thin dust hung in the starlight air. It had been kicked up by hooves and that was why he smelled it in the first place, riding into the night wind.

Highley also recognised the dust for what it was, starting to rein in even as Ira did. While they stared hard, somewhere in the night the faintest of stealthy sounds echoed. Ira's head only moved slightly but he could see off the road and his pulse

slowed beat as the awful truth struck him an instant before hell broke loose. Faintly visible in the junipers were men holding guns ready to fire. He did not know how many were on this side, but enough. There would be more on the other.

It was a trap they rode into. A deadly one that could annihilate them. Perfectly set, calculatingly gauged. There existed no time to give warning. The sinister men in the junipers were even then letting gun hammers fall.

The volley crashed into the cowboys from both sides, producing instant chaos. Yet Ira was in action when the hail of lead struck, drawing his gun and spurring his horse off the side of the road. He fired once at the rider on the end of the line and then he was falling out of the saddle, his horse running away between two trees.

In a daze he saw horses and men down, threshing and dying in the road. He was wounded again, a bullet tearing a new hole in his left leg as well as opening the old wound. The burn of it flashed upward through him, and he knew surprise to find himself still able to hold his sixgun.

The noise thundered on deafeningly and he looked on the death scene for what seemed like eternity. Yet it was only a matter of seconds. Highley never got away from his dead horse. Wounded, Judy's straw boss stretched out, firing into the brush while riders behind shot into his back.

Then a pause came while Highley climbed shakily to his feet. His gun remained at ready but he held up, gaping in astonishment at a rider pushing through the brush. A big man well known to him, also with a gun ready to spout death.

'Boss!' Highley's stunned and incredulous scream broke on the air. 'It's us, boss!' Then he toppled sideways, dead as the blood ran out of his wounds.

All gunfire ceased suddenly. Out of the fringe below Ira rode Pinky Norman, quitting the saddle in one jump. The ramrod shouted strickenly, 'We killed our own boys!' and burst into bitter swear words.

Judy cowboys emerged from the brush filled with horror at the terrible mistake made. They had killed every horse on the road, only Ira's dun escaping. Only one cowboy survived the deadly attack and he was wounded.

Paulsen was a long time getting out of his saddle. He walked mechanically, staring around in disbelief. Trigger nervousness, failure to make certain of their victims before firing on them brought on this. They heard riders on the road in time to face from it. Naturally they thought them to be 3 B.

'How could it happen?' Paulsen cried jerkily. Nobody answered him. 'Wasn't possible for Clem to get to Judy and fetch help this soon!' He tried to extenuate himself from the awful error, and it wouldn't work.

Ira prised himself off the ground, ~~six~~gun reloaded. He moved carefully, thankfully finding that the blood running into his boot was stopped. His head cleared again and he moved purposefully for the road. At the moment he hated Paulsen like no other man on earth. A bushwhack, no matter who pulled it. This made twice Paulsen and his crew shot him down.

Coming to a halt with back to a tree he remained on the side of the road, cursing the cowman for everything he could think of. At the first whipping word out of him even the cowboys caring for the wounded paused. Paulsen did not open his mouth once, just remained ramrod straight with his bitter, cold face turned unmoving on the cowboy.

'You're a lobo wolf!' Ira charged. 'Too quick to shoot to kill. You'll live to regret it. Twice I've been shot plumb bad by your outfit. I reckon that's enough. By rights I'd ought to kill you here and now!'

Of course he wouldn't, for Ira was no cold-blooded killer. Paulsen did not open his mouth. Maybe the cowman was broken with regret. Or more likely felt no emotion whatever in his shocked condition.

Ira turned away from him, hobbling on step before he stiffened abruptly. It was intuition, a sense bred by experience in past vicious bushwhack fights that warned him. Actually he heard nothing, just felt a chilled sensation of disaster. They might have known the gunfire would bring the 3 B if they were near. It had and they were already in. The second bushwhack on the road was no miscalculated one.

'Hit for cover!' Ira yelled, throwing his pain tortured body under the brushy limbs of the nearest juniper.

Some of Judy's men did and that alone saved the outfit

from immediate massacre. The guns crashed from below and on the west, another murderous fire aimed at anything alive. The bullets found marks, the *whack* of them into flesh could make only that sound.

Judy cowboys fired back, and across the road as if venting his bitter gall Paulsen gave a good account of himself. Two riders made the mistake of entering it below the scene, and the cowman shot one dead out of the saddle.

After a few minutes less lead spewed from the brush. But 3 B was still there, all around them in fact. Judy cowboys took the opportunity to assess their damage and occupy better positions to fight in. It was in the brush beyond Paulsen that Simp Buzzard's gloating laughter rang out.

'You helped us right smart, Paulsen!' he yelled. 'Killed off your own men and now we got you!'

The cowman did not bother answering. Simp laughed uproariously before calling, 'You wanta give up? Haw, haw! You surrender and I'll promise we'll make your hanging as painless as possible!'

One single shot cracked in the brush, from where Paulsen lay. The spurt of fire only amused Simp more. His triumph was cut short by Judy opening fire again. While Simp roared with laughter his men sneaked closer for the finish. It might have been the last gasp of Judy except that Norman caught on in time.

Ira lay on a corner of the terrible scene, temporarily out of any fighting. He surmised that half of Judy's men died in the two bushwhacks. No telling how many of the survivors were so badly wounded they could not do much. If Paulsen did not go under this time his lucky star would have to fall suddenly on his enemies.

His head in the grass, Ira could see north into a narrow slit on the side of the upper road. Into it moved three men, doing so because they must get into the road to finish the bushwhack job. No other way, for brush was too thick on the sides where Judy cowboys took to it.

It was Cheyenne, Pete Welks and a thin man whom Ira did not know. They hugged the ground close, on their knees after having crawled through the junipers. In what they imagined a

safe spot they reconnoitered to locate victims. That accomplished they prepared to pounce, moving forward for better range.

Ira's ~~six~~gun angled from the ground. It was Cheyenne he wanted most, then the others if he could get them. He took as careful aim as he knew how, but even as the hammer fell from under his thumb knew unaccountably that he missed. The bullet was close however, and Cheyenne flung himself down, scrambling under low limbs to escape.

Pete and his companion merely turned a little, throwing lead at Ira. Above the thunder of his gun he could not hear their lead strike the brush. Knowing this must be fast, he centred all attention on them. He squeezed a bullet at each, surely he thought, and was letting to the third time before the man beside Pete spilled over in a heap. Both had stopped working their guns, and now as Ira waited he watched fascinated as Pete dropped forward on his face. He did it slowly, weirdly coming to rest folded in the middle, legs crossed and head into the dirt of the road from a curved body. It was astonishing both died as they did, until Ira recollected they had been braced on their knees and lower legs.

Cheyenne disappeared completely during that few seconds of time. Fearing a concentrated fire at his spot Ira crawled forward and in doing so found his dislodged hat. He was back where he first landed on the ground, and veered to the right into unbroken grass.

A scattering of shots died away in the brush. The following silence disturbed only by the last gasps of a dying man, unseen and unattended in the shadows. Simp Buzzard had been badly damaged, too. The death of Pete Welks alone cut a bad hole in his fighting machine. Cheyenne's loss might have changed the situation to disaster. His failure to down him irked Ira. Now it would have to be done over again.

The delay lengthened alarmingly, and yet the 3 B did not come in to finish them off. They could do it easily, and Ira waited patiently, intending to get as many of them as possible. Given a chance at Cheyenne or Simp Buzzard he would be satisfied.

Maybe they tried to outwait Judy, hoping thereby to dis-

cover how many were left. They could not be heard, nor did any of Judy's cowboys stir around to create noise of their own. Waiting, they expected the worst. Finally the feint materialised from the southward to put an end to doubt.

Three quick shots rang out, dying away in echoes without a general fight coming on. A probing action only. A single scout working through the brush to determine the location of survivors. He found one, fired on him and withdrew.

More than before Ira watched the open swath of the road, expecting them to try there again. He looked at the night sky, realising time fled fast. Still the 3 B did not charge and he wondered what kept them. Simp Buzzard could attain complete victory if he followed up, and surely he would.

Oddly, he did not push his advantage and on the west side of the road Paulsen who had never been idle a moment, slipped well away from the gory scene. He sustained a small shoulder wound and yet felt no pain because he was as bitter as a man could get. With it all, disaster around him, his nature refused to admit defeat. A fighter to the last he would be, and die well if he must.

His penetration into the thicker junipers was not a scout. He hoped to run into some of them, preferably Simp Buzzard. Whoever he encountered he would make a quick end of it. Some pay for the cowboys who died on the road, he thought. But Paulsen did not find anyone. Not even a loose horse except those of Judy tangled in the brush he passed closer to the road.

Mystified, not daring to believe they were gone, he advanced further and around to the south and the road. There he located a wounded cowboy, lifting him onto his feet. Next he stared around in the starlight, and his voice carried incredulously.

'I'm damned if they ain't vamoosed!'

His men began to stir out, moving through the pile of dead men and horses. As the minutes passed extent of the tragic incident grew more apparent.

Since their movements brought no retaliation they were satisfied of the 3 B's departure. Paulsen said someone should start collecting the horses from the brush. Norman and another cowboy busied themselves gathering the wounded and working

on them. Paulsen helped drag the dead into a cleared spot beside the road.

Afterwards he went over to Norman, the stony silence of his surviving men more condemning than he ever imagined possible.

'Pinky, I reckon we'd better send for the sawbones to come here,' the cowman began woodenly. 'Also fetch back a couple of wagons to haul them out in. Them as can't ride horses.'

'Maybe,' the ramrod answered between compressed lips. 'But who's able to ride for town, especially with Simp Buzzard likely on that road going to burn Judy?'

Horses were coming in, and saddles from the carcasses removed and stowed in the timber. Paulsen walked ten feet up the road, wheeled and came back.

'I don't think he'll go to Judy after this,' he averred harshly. 'Simp Buzzard has been hit hard, too. I see some of his dead around here.'

'But you see more of ours,' the ramrod said dully. 'That's the difference. Maybe he won't be fooled long in not realising he's got us nearly wiped out.'

Ira decided not to bother tearing up his undershirt to bandage the new wound. The bleeding having stopped it felt closed to his touch. He'd do it somewhere else later on and wanted only to get away from here.

He got to his feet, holstered gun dragging now like an enormous weight. Not leaving at once he stood listening to the iron-like, galled voice of the cowman going on and on.

'I don't think what we can do about if they're streaking for Judy. Don't think they're able, nohow.' He couldn't make up his mind. He was doubtful, and in their condition any move on Judy's part nearly impossible.

'I can't get it through my head how we could of made a mistake like this,' the cowman still sounded badly puzzled. 'We had time to look at them on the road. Didn't nobody recognise any of the boys?'

He got no reply to that, only the studied quietness of his men. No, they did not take time to discover the truth before opening fire. It happened because Paulsen let his gun go,

signalling the trap shut without catching more than a glimpse of riders.

Unreasonable rage mounted in Ira fast, and he turned on his feet, staring through the starlight at the cowman. He did not hate him now and did not want to curse Paulsen. Instead of the former tearing emotion he was only sad, somewhat grieved that it had been so wantonly useless.

'That's the way you pulled it on me in Shoeton,' Ira spoke evenly. 'You shoot without knowing what you're doing, without reason.'

Paulsen said tonelessly, 'I'm not ducking any of my responsibilities.'

'A blind man shooting a gun is a fool.'

Ira turned wearily to the right, starting off by himself. Paulsen said something else but he refused to listen. He kept going, around the upper spur of timber. Beyond their sight, hardly aware of them any more, he rested while rolling a cigarette. Replacing the tobacco sack in a shirt pocket he lit it, going on seeking his horse.

He would ride on to the Lamsons', he thought. What happened in the basin no longer interested him as between right and wrong. What Simp Buzzard did now hardly mattered. As long as he stayed away from the Lamson place.

The dun stood against stunted junipers, bridle reins tangled under foot. Ira moved in slowly to straighten them out, inspecting his horse for bullet marks before going into the saddle despite renewed pain when weight fell on his left leg.

His course eastward was aimless. But it would bring him onto the creek eventually and he could pass downstream to the small ranch.

20

UNABLE to travel faster than a walk it was sunup when Ira reached the westward bend of the creek. He stirred from lethargy enough to rein directly away from the creek, entering the faint traces of the seldom used woods' road.

His senses were dulled and Ira sweated with fever, wondering if he would ever get rested up again. His listlessness prevailed and finally when he came in against the big tree short of the end of the porch his horse halted automatically, head pointed at the barn.

The intelligence of the scene in the bright sunlight did not reach him right away. Then he recognised Lamson and Ruth on the upper porch end, backs to him. Their bodies partly blocked view of the west side of the barn where several men milled around.

It was not caution that stopped him from proceeding on. Just a weary feeling of not caring what he did and a reluctance to go through the motions of moving. At last he recognised Simp Buzzard, when the cowman swung out away from the open corral gate. Ropes were being tossed over the high cross timber crowning it. Three Judy cowboys came into focus before Ira's eyes. They were wounded, wearing bandages and with wrists tied behind their backs. A rigorous resentment moved through him. They were the wounded left in the cabin, and Simp Buzzard was going to hang them.

He had not rushed on to raid Judy. For the unexpected reason that he did not have enough men left after the bushwhack on the main basin road. Few of the hardcases were in evidence. Ira thought, Simp Buzzard came directly here after the fight. Took possession again and thinks he's going to operate 3 B from Lamson's.

He got out of the saddle, weight dragging hard on the dun's side. Able to stand despite long cramped legs, Ira wobbled

from the tree to the row of brush placed by Lamson as a cover blind.

Coming to the end facing the log wall of the house he veered left. Obeying only an ingrained sense of caution he hobbled in against the rear wall, changing to a course that took him on to the cabin as cover against discovery from men before the corral.

Their talk became audible, Simp Buzzard cursing someone to hurry. It was Tiny who asked about using a horse to hang the cowboys from, and Simp told him they didn't need one. They intended to pull the hapless victims from the ground on the ropes. Let them strangle to death.

The plan caused Ira to grin to himself. Simp Buzzard was not going to hang anybody this day. He stood a moment resting at the lower corner of the rear wall. In motion again he shuffled along next to the logs. The wall was short and nearing the other corner, the abrupt step of a man on hard ground brought his gun from the holster in a flash of speed.

Ira was startled, and the next second Cheyenne Roden jumped around the corner almost into his face. Cheyenne never expected to find him there. For one paralysed moment he gaped in amazement, not reaching for his holster. He was going to yell, and any disturbance here would bring the rest running. Caught at a disadvantage Ira acted almost mechanically. Wanting most to prevent alarm, he slugged with the barrel of his gun.

The beginning yell never escaped Cheyenne's throat, and his hand did not get the sixgun from the holster on his right leg. Ira struck a heavy blow, knocking Cheyenne unconscious instantaneously. The hardcase's body looped forward against the log wall, sliding off to the ground. Still in action Ira seized the neck band of his shirt, pulling him another foot to make certain his boots did not protrude beyond the corner in sight of the men at the corral.

He did not like taking Cheyenne this way. Never imagined that a meeting with him could end except in death. Yet there he lay, stone cold and without a doubt, out for some time. A fluke, an accident and finally Ira shrugged his shoulders.

Maybe it was best that Cheyenne should be taken this way after all.

Reaching low he pulled the hardcase's gun from the holster, retaining it in his left hand, muzzle pointed downward. Maybe it would come in handy yet. When he passed the cabin corner into the sunlight there were only three of them visible. Simp Buzzard, the lumbering Tiny, and the kid, Stover, busy tossing the end of the third lariat over the gate/cross timber.

The separating distance was short, within easy sixgun range. Still, Ira did not stop. Unhurriedly he moved on towards them. It was Stover who, getting the rope over at last, swung on his feet intending to say something to Simp and spotted him. Stover's face paled in sudden astonishment. Simp whirled around, and Tiny an instant later. They saw Ira standing there like a retributive ghost before he fired his hip held gun.

Simp Buzzard leaped behind the bulk of Tiny Welks. The bullet hit the big man, yet it only shook him, doing nothing to slow his gun draw. Simp fired from the side, as did Stover, bullets throwing dirt at Ira's feet.

It was a tight squeeze and yet to Ira it appeared to unfold in aggravating slowness. It was his nerves, his dulled condition making it appear that way. Simp Buzzard tried to get in a fatal bullet from behind Tiny who began advancing in measured tread. Ira threw a second shot at Simp Buzzard, and Tiny took that one also. The big man seemed undefeatable, not changing his course or outwardly handicapped by two serious wounds.

In desperation to get him out of the way, Ira emptied his gun into the big man, switching weapons in the air with a border toss afterwards. Tiny did not appear harmed much. For he still moved flat-footed and deliberate, firing steadily even though he missed.

Yet at long last Tiny was crumbling. To blast him down Ira aimed at the centre of his barrel-like chest, only to see Tiny sway to the right as he squeezed off the bullet. For one stark instant Simp Buzzard was fully exposed directly behind Tiny, no chance to leap for cover, and the hunk of lead bored him.

Simp Buzzard threw his arms wide, losing his gun, and uttering a shrill scream of agony plunged backward into Stover who was too close. Both sprawled in a heap, Stover in the mix-up also losing his gun. It slid over the hard ground towards the three prisoners and one lashed out with a boot to kick it under the nearest ground pole of the corral.

These happenings Ira realised as a picture stopped on a screen, his attention wholly on Tiny who refused to go down. Broken, yet he swaggled upright onto his feet once more. He held his sixgun by both hands, pressed butt against the centre of his body. A man terrible in death, for he was dying, and a fighter hard to kill. But he retained enough strength to pull the trigger again, and somewhat reluctantly Ira felt Cheyenne's gun kick in his hand.

The big man swayed, his last shot spewing into the dirt at his feet. Already falling forward he struck the ground in an arch, crumpling hat tighter on his massive head, and rolled onto his side, still for ever.

Stover having extracted himself from Simp Buzzard's body, stared around at the ground trying to locate a weapon. On the run a moment before, Lamson now scooted past him, retrieving Simp Buzzard's fallen gun. He brought it around on Stover, who stood dazedly, unable to comprehend that the swift showdown was over.

'Where's Cheyenne Roden?' Lamson called to Ira. 'He's around somewhere. Better watch for him!'

Ruth's light coloured gingham dress flashed through the light before Ira. She was on the way to help, rushing for the wounded cowboys with bound wrists. Remembering Cheyenne, Ira turned slowly on rubbery knees, not feeling the jar of the ground up through his bad leg.

Cheyenne lay exactly as he saw him last, with a supine immovability that seemed permanent. Ira holstered his reloaded sixgun, and shoved that taken from the hardcase into left hip pocket.

Two of the wounded released by Ruth, ran around behind the cabin. They halted, glancing from Cheyenne's body to Ira.

'He dead?' one asked quickly.

'No,' Ira shook his head. 'I knocked him out.'

'They moved in a bit before daylight,' the cowboy said in a calmer voice. 'Claimed they'd done in all of Judy's crew on the basin road. Said nobody was left alive, and before they finished Judy the boss bushwhacked some of the boys coming to join us.'

The cowboys waited for a moment with anxious, pale faces, believing most of the story must be true. Ira inclined his head sombrely.

'It happened about like they told you,' he admitted. 'Except there's a few of them escaped the 3 B's bushwhack. Only me and one more got out of the one Steve Paulsen pulled by mistake.'

The cowboys did not say anything about it, stunned by the horror of what happened. Both bore body wounds, but possessed the movement of their limbs. One finally went over to inspect Cheyenne, dragging him from the wall into the sunlight around the lower cabin end.

The third wounded cowboy stood holding a gun beside Lamson, Stover before them. Ruth was part way to the house but when the others appeared she paused to watch. A bucket of water was fetched from the cabin and sloshed on Cheyenne. In a few minutes the hardcase came out of it. On his feet he rubbed his jaw and side of the face where the sixgun barrel struck. Then he started violently, going stiff while his eyes roved over the visible evidence. He couldn't believe it, but the bodies on the ground proved it was so. The big basin fight was over and done with and they had lost. He deflated slowly, shaking a bit, and walked over hopelessly to join Stover.

'Simp Buzzard refused to let the Judy cowboys have breakfast,' Ruth said, approaching Ira part way. 'He said there was no use feeding men he aimed to hang. If you will come along with them I'll feed you all now.'

She turned away at once for the house. Ira did not move until she was beyond sight of him. For his wounded condition was exposed at once. The bunch collected and Lamson handling the prisoners, they walked to the porch. There Lamson handed his sixgun to one of Judy's men.

He ran off towards the saddle shed, reappearing with his old rifle and a few other weapons. They had been seized by 3 B in the house to prevent Lamson from jumping them at the first good opportunity.

Ira remained behind the cowboys, who conducted the prisoners inside, and sat them close together on the floor against the kitchen wall. They took chairs at the table and when he entered, Lamson disposed of the extra firearms. He sat down facing the prisoners across the room, rifle resting on his knees.

Ira had no appetite with the fever bothering him, but he did drink the coffee. Ruth observed him covertly, always somewhere near. The three cowboys wanted more details of the tragic fighting, of which Ira was reluctant to talk.

'I met help on the way to Paulsen,' he said finally in order to halt innumerable queries. 'We laid a block for Simp Buzzard's outfit on the rim, but gave ourselves away. We chased after them, lost the 3 B and entering the road, rode into Paulsen's deadfall. They shot without being sure who we was. That's the size of it.'

When he returned to his coffee the cowboys considered each other big eyed. Among themselves they speculated on how a gross error could have been made. That irritated Ira some, too. Of course Paulsen had not fired on his own men purposely. The cowboy was simply far too trigger happy, and it had cost him dearly this time.

Before they quite finished eating the noise of incoming riders raised towards the barn. The dog ran to the end of the porch, barking. Lamson slid onto his feet as did two of the cowboys. After giving Ira a sharp glance, the old man left the kitchen with them.

Ruth moved to the side of the table next to Ira, sinking onto a flat bottom chair. Her wan face still refused to take on colour, even if the Lamsons were certainly secure now. Her eyes studied him intently.

'You have been shot again,' she began haltingly. 'I didn't realise it until just now. The fever on you. The blood dried on your left trouser leg.'

'Opened up the old wound last night,' he replied with attempt

at casualness, not telling her all of it lest she worry too much. 'After a little I'll wrap it up to keep the dirt out. Right now I expect that some of Judy or their friends coming in.'

It was Paulsen and Norman, accompanied by four cowboys who came out from town to help Judy, when they learned the wagons and the doctor was sent for. Paulsen entered first, Lamson and Norman squeezing in from the sides because he halted with back to the door just over the threshold.

The cowman wearing a bandage on the left shoulder and across his chest, was battered and bruised. His red-rimmed eyes were swollen almost shut, and he looked ten years older than the day before. His gaze swept the room to come to rest on Ira finally.

'Wagons loading dead and wounded for the trip to town when we left,' he said hoarsely. 'Rest of my crew going to town. Came for the three here.'

Ira merely inclined his head as indication that he understood. Paulsen breathed deep and glanced at the two hardcases sitting forlornly against the wall.

'Outside I saw where you got some of them. When we get this pair hung that ought to take care of them all.'

Ira came onto his feet, letting the chair slide away from his legs.

'Paulsen, there's going to be no more hanging.' His voice lifted like a whip-lash and fell away. 'Did you hear me?' he flung at the burning orbs on him. 'The two sole survivors of the 3 B, outlaws, thieves, rustlers or whatever they actually are, they are not being strung up!'

It astonished Ira that Paulsen even thought of such a deed now, let alone mention it. Hadn't the man gone through enough bloodshed to want to quit and let some kind of peace take over?

The cowman's harshness did not change, and yet inside he caved because the opposition was just and proper. He sensed something of the same resentment the cowboy expressed in others, and let the matter drop.

'We can take them to jail for you, I expect,' he said without any change of tone. 'They can be jailed there for the sheriff to come for.'

'That's fine, except that I wouldn't trust you to take them to town,' Ira replied. 'You might change your mind and hang them on the road!'

Paulsen surveyed him at some length and managed a faint grin.

'You've got plenty of real reasons to mistrust me, I know,' his voice cracked some. 'But I don't think I want to hang any more thieves after all. The cowboys with me can take them out.'

He turned to his men next, asking, 'You boys feel like riding a horse until we overtake the wagons?'

All three left the table, pausing to thank Ruth for their meals. Norman brought in the four friendly cowboys from the porch, who took charge of the two prisoners. Paulsen had his Judy cowboys out, Lamson going along to show them their riding gear and horses.

Cheyenne moved part way to the table, his throat convulsing before words came. His eyes steadied on Ira.

'Thanks for what you did a few minutes ago,' he said. 'We didn't expect less than a rope when Steve Paulsen got here.'

Ira surveyed the cowboys who came with Judy to Lamson's place.

'Paulsen and I had it out about that,' he told them. 'He agreed to let these two be jailed for trial.'

'We heard it,' answered the nearest, a freckle-faced, bloop-haired cowboy. 'I can tell you, we don't go for them necktie parties. These two culprits will reach jail alive!'

'Thanks.'

The bunch departed, and Ira relaxed restfully on the chair. His fingers reached to touch Ruth's soft hair. She flushed, with colour returning to her cheeks at last.

'We're going to get you doctored and put to bed,' she insisted. 'You'll stay there this time until you're well.'

'Yes, ma'm,' he spoke that teasingly. 'Wait a little spell longer. I'm beginning to feel rested.'

Some riders were leaving the ranch already. But surprisingly, Paulsen returned to the house with Lamson. The cowman walked inside to the table, regarding the cowboy with kindling interest.

'Dave Lamson tells me you're liable to stick around,' he began. 'I'll be back in about three weeks, and we'll gather my young Cross P Cows put into Lamson's iron. A lot of trouble venting and branding again. If you want, at that time I'll make a deal for you and Lamson to take them over. There's plenty of unused range in this end of the basin.'

Ira did not say a word. In a way Paulsen's offer caught him totally unexpectedly. Also he sensed that it was made because Lamson mentioned him and Ruth. Paulsen swung on his heels, Lamson saying, 'He'll make the deal to buy them cows. Can't run 'em by myself so he'll have to agree.'

On the threshold Paulsen half turned towards Ira a final time.

'Naturally you've got a real grudge against me,' he began tersely. 'Expect I'd feel the same. However, on my part I want honest cowmen in these parts. Only them kind, who'll fight and stop thieves from working, are any good to the country. That is why I hope you'll stay, and will help all I can to get you to.'

'By the way,' he grew more thoughtful, 'how come you into this mess to begin with? The letter from Lynn on the up and up, all you wanted was a job?'

'That's what the recommendation was for, wasn't it?'

'Yeah,' wryly. 'Then unforeseen things happened. You can have a job with Judy as far as that goes. But wouldn't you rather be here in the basin running your own outfit?'

'Right.'

Paulsen went on, leaving the upper porch end with Lamson. Ruth smiled at Ira and reached to hold his left hand. He looked at the arch of her red lips and thought she was the most beautiful girl in the world.

'Now let's take care of you and then you go to sleep,' she said huskily.

'No hurry,' he evaded. 'First off, I want to kiss you and then we'll see. I'm getting better all the time!'

He reversed the hand holding on rising. Ruth moved slowly to his chest, head upturned so she could look into his face.

'You will stay, won't you?'

'Haven't left yet have I?' He grinned at her rosy face. 'No, not going to, unless you refuse to put on double harness.'

Her soft arms went up around his neck and he got no answer until after she kissed him.

THE END

